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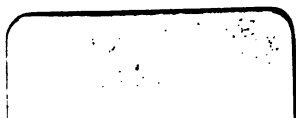
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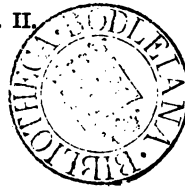
BY ANNIE THOMAS,

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"WALTER GORING," "NO ALTERNATIVE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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CHAPTER I.

"A WELL-BELOVED YOUTH."

"It would have gone hard with me if I hadn't met you," he repeats, as I bring myself to a full stop before him, and look up into his handsome, harassed young face with my inquiring, sympathetic eyes.

"Is anything wrong with Claire?" I ask at once.

"Well, yes and no; I hardly know which to say, to tell the truth," he answers impatiently. "Claire has disappointed me a good deal to-day; either she doesn't care for me half as much as I thought she did, or

there's a good deal of selfishness about her."

"There's not a grain of selfishness in her nature," I say warmly; "and, as for her not caring for you, she has no other inducement but that of caring for you, to make her marry you."

"We're not married yet," he says carelessly; "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, you know. A girl who stands out for her own way, as Claire did to-day, is quite capable of throwing a fellow over, if he ever found occasion to thwart her."

"Claire will never break a promise lightly; besides, Theo, you know she loves you——"

"She's not blest with any very great power of portraying affection, even if she feels it; but that's not what I came out to say to you to-day," he says, with the vexed care-worn expression creeping over his handsome mobile face. "I want to ask you to help me—to be a real friend to me, Tim."

He takes my hand as he speaks, and puts it on his arm, and presses it affectionately, and looks down at it with pathetic tenderness. And I cannot meet his eyes steadily, for the pulses of my heart are quickened, and to still them I have to remind myself that he is going to be my brother, that he is Claire's lover, and that I am to marry Mr. Murray, who is as unconscious of all this infirmity of purpose of mine as one of the dogs at my heels—more unconscious, in all probability; for I often fancy that our faithful four-footed friends know a good deal more about us than they would in their loyalty like to mention.

In order to be a real friend to Theo, I must be true as Milan steel to Claire. Reasoning thus rapidly, I am justified to myself in assuring him warmly and earnestly that I will be a real friend to him.

“You see,” he begins, “I have been wasting a lot of time down here, and time is money—is life to a young fellow like

myself, who has brains and nothing else for capital, and wants to make a career. This time here with Claire—with you all—has been an idyl, a summer romance; but the stern realities of life have set in, they are placed very prominently before me, and Claire seems vexed that I can't help seeing them."

I know Claire so well, that I answer at once—

"Claire will never want to make you idle—she will never put a pebble in the path of your ambition, and she'd rather give up the best man in the world than that he should give up his career for her. I speak for Claire as I would for myself."

"If you were speaking for yourself, now, I would believe you fast enough, Tim dear," he murmurs; "but I am not quite credulous enough to take in all those noble sentiments which you're enunciating about Claire. While she remembers that my ambition may forward her own, she's all right enough, and will further it to the best

of her ability; but she's apt to forget that fact in the absorbing interest which she takes in herself, and in these moments of forgetfulness she would let me slide to destruction rather than take the trouble to hold out one of her pretty fingers to save me from it."

"Claire would never go to *your* sister if you had one, and speak against you," I say indignantly.

"Probably not. Claire would remind herself cautiously of the proverbial weakness of her sex—tattling. Now, I'm not in the least afraid of you're repeating a word I've said to Claire. I shouldn't value you, and turn to you—I shouldn't love you as I do, if I couldn't trust you."

I am a reed shaken by the wind as he speaks. I ought to ice my heart and make my manner frigid. Instead of doing this, I remind myself that he is going to be my brother, and that on these grounds I am justified in doing a little evil to myself, in order that good may come to him. Perhaps,

if the special form of evil which I contemplate doing were unpleasant to me, I should recoil from it. As it is, I heroically brave any painful result that may accrue to myself from pursuing such a course, and say—

“You may always trust me to do everything to further your happiness — and Claire’s.”

“Love me for myself a little,” he whispers; “leave Claire out of the question sometimes. Tim! why did you go away to Brighton, just as I was getting to feel that life wasn’t life without you? I mustn’t say anything of this kind now, because—because you’re a darling, and I am engaged to your sister, and you think that you’re going to marry Murray, and be happy for ever after; but still love me for myself a little, won’t you?”

We are walking slowly along among the trees in the wilderness as he says this. The whole situation is pretty, wrong, unworthy of him, and of Claire’s sister! I remind myself that it is these things. I take my

hand from his arm, I force my eyes to lift themselves with the semblance of fearlessness, and I compel my tongue to speak without faltering.

“You may trust me, and confide in me just exactly as if I were your sister,” I say. “Now, what do you want me to do?”

“It’s a paltry, beggarly matter to put before a girl,” he says complainingly; “but the fact is, I might do a splendid thing for myself if I could only put my hands on a couple of hundred pounds at the present moment—there’s my cursed misfortune. I can’t do it; mine are summer friends; they’ll love me, and waste my time, and cavil at my not making a local habitation and a name for myself, but they won’t risk their blessed two hundred pounds!”

He pauses, evidently upset by the recollection of the ungenerosity of those with whom he has had to deal. And I feel very much as I should do if I saw the original Apollo Belvedere placed upon a tenpenny Paris plaster column.

“ Oh, Theo ! if I had two hundred, or two thousand, or twenty thousand, for that matter, you should have it.”

“ Now, look here, don't be ecstatic,” he says quietly, “ but if you want to help me, do this : just ask your father to let you have two hundred pounds ; he will understand that it's for your trousseau, and by the time you want it for that purpose I shall be able to refund it to you. It's not a great thing, this first favour that I ask of you, is it, little Tim ? it's only asking you to put off the purchase of your wedding finery for a few weeks.”

I would put it off for ever to serve him ; I love him so utterly, that I would go in sack-cloth and ashes from the present moment to the day of my death, if my doing so would make things pleasant for him ; still, I feel that in asking me to do this he is asking me to do something which is ignoble. I am impulsive, but I am not an impostor. Why should Theo take it for granted that I am ready to go to my father, whom I regard as

the grandest gentleman that ever lived, with a lie in my mouth ? But I love him. I love every light and shadow on the careless face that changes so rapidly, mirroring truly every rapid change within. Besides, in saving him, shall I not be serving Claire ? Their interests are indivisible.

“ Will you do this for me, and do it at once, Tim ? ” he asks softly. “ Claire raved and ranted when I asked her to do it, although she is the one who will benefit by it in the end ; but you have nothing to gain by making the effort for me. And so, as you’re the truest woman I know, you’ll make it ? ”

Aye ! that I will ! for my sister’s sake and his, love shall win for him the lucre that he needs. I pledge myself very quietly, merely saying, “ I’ll speak to papa to-night ; ” but he feels a certain security in my words I am proud to see, for he becomes his own irrepressible self again as we approach the house, and trolls out more thrillingly than ever the ballad of “ The Bailiff’s Daughter of Islington.”

"We'll dramatize this ballad for two, and cast ourselves for the parts, shall we?" he laughs. "You're just the kind of girl to play the little game she played."

"But I don't think that you're just the kind of man to be faithful to the girl for seven years," I reply.

"Well, I don't know that I am," he says, "and I think I should have 'sworn off' if I had found her sitting in 'mean attire' in a hedge. To find the girl you've loved with seven additional years on her head, and in 'mean attire,' must be a trying thing. What a pity it is you women ever grow old! you're so nice when you're young."

He looks at me with the eyes of a connoisseur as he speaks, and I wonder how he will regard Claire when she has furrows on her brow and wrinkles on her cheek. Hastily I banish the horrible thought. Old age and Claire are antagonistic ideas.

"I'd take to writing for the stage," he goes on airily, "if it didn't involve such a

lot of dirty work. I couldn't stand snobs of managers taking the high hand with me, and cads of actors grumbling at their parts ; and that's what all young dramatic authors have to go through at first. If it weren't for that trifling drawback, I shouldn't mind the career at all.”

He speaks quite as if it were merely his refined sensitiveness to rebuffs which prevents him from placing himself on the same platform with Gilbert, and in my ignorance and infatuation I am ready to credit him with the power of producing some similar intellectual phenomenon to the “Wicked World.” What can he not do—brilliant young Adonis that he is? Still it does occur to me to wonder a little that he does nothing at all.

“What do you think you'll be by-and-by, Theo?” I ask hesitatingly. It seems like presumption on my part to suggest that he should ever be anything more than he is.

“What shall I be by-and-by?—a jolly

lucky fellow if a little robbery I'm in now turns out well."

"A little robbery!" I repeat, horror-stricken.

"Yes, don't be alarmed; I merely meant a little speculation not wholly unconnected with a horse—that's what I want the two hundred pounds for. Mind you don't disappoint me, Tim. Get me that money as soon as you can, and I'll be off without delay to play for fortune, and win it for Claire."

This last sentence settles me. It is for Claire that he is going to strive! It is for Claire that I am going to sneakingly aid him. I go into the house fully resolved to make my appeal to papa before I go to bed this night, and firmly convinced that my resolve is a good one.

As we cross the hall, Claire meets us, and ranges herself by my side at once.

"Theo and you look like a couple of conspirators," she begins. "I watched you crossing the lawn from the wilderness gate.

I couldn't see your faces, but there was a stealthiness in your step that was suspicious. What have you been conspiring about? ”

She tries to speak playfully, but she cannot subdue the expression of real serious interest which she takes in the subject which she is handling in the dark.

“ Our conspiracy is a most harmless and honourable one,” Theo says gaily and mendaciously. “ I've been telling Tim that I'm going in for writing for the stage. I've an awful lot of dramatic talent, and she's good enough to give me hearty encouragement—which is more than I can say of you, Miss Claire.”

She looks at him with such love, such reproach, in her sweet lovely face, and I turn to leave them to make love and peace. But she follows me, and takes my hand, and says—

“ Is this true, Tim ? is Theo going to try and do good work well ? ”

In all my life I have never paltered with

the truth to my sister ; I do so now, for I say with the ring of sincerity in my voice—

“ I think he’s going to try.”

She heaves a sigh of relief, and I leave them. When I see them again, it is at the dinner-table, and Theo is making arrangements for the disposition of our time for the next few weeks, and identifying himself with all these arrangements, as lightly and gracefully as if he had not an hour ago assured me that he was going off almost immediately to fight for fortune for Claire.

“ Can you do a little copying for me to-night, Tim ? ” papa asks in a couple of hours later ; and I acquiesce gladly, for I am rejoiced to do anything kind to papa to-night. I am going to deceive him for the first time in my life !

“ It’s good practice,” he goes on laughing ; “ you’ll have to copy for Murray in a little time. By the way, when do you think of becoming Mrs. Murray ? I may as well know the worst at once.”

I put my arms round his neck, and bury my head in his breast, and whisper—

“ Papa, I want to speak to you alone.”

Aunt Helen hears the sound, but cannot catch the sense. She pounces forward, looking large enough to crush me, and says—

“ If you have anything to say to your father that you are ashamed for me to hear, pray take him into another room, and say it, Tim, but do not whisper in my presence, please.

“ I am not ashamed to say it before you, but I don't care that you should hear it,” I say as coolly as I can. “ Do come into your study with me, papa ; I feel there that I am more to you than she is.”

I am sorry that I have spoken the words as soon as they are uttered. My father clasps me closer to him with a reassuring shrug, but I can feel all the while that my words have hurt him. As for Aunt Helen, she simply stands by silently, seething in a white fury. The look on her face is not a good one, as she glances from papa to

me ; but I feel triumphantly that she is powerless to hurt me with my father, as he says—

“ My daughters are more to me than all the world ; we needn’t retire to the study to prove your supremacy ; still, we’ll go there, my pet, if you please.”

And we go there !

I carry my first begging petition very badly, very ungracefully, to the paternal throne ; nevertheless, the great fact remains that I carry it ! I get papa well down in the recesses of the plumpest arm-chair in his sanctum, and stand by his side with my arms round his neck, and my curly head poised on the top of his grey one, and then I say—

“ Papa dear, I shall want such a lot of new things to wear when I’m married—you know that, don’t you ? ”

“ And you will want a lot of money to get the new things—is that what you want me to understand, my child ? ”

I nod assent.

"Of course I understood so much as that of my daughter's needs," he laughs. "I was saying to-day that as the lambs insist upon being slaughtered they must be well decked for this sacrifice. Hadn't you better trust to Aunt Helen to order your fit out?"

With sudden injudicious energy I exclaim, "I don't want Aunt Helen to have anything at all to do with it. I don't want her to know even that you have given me the money. I want to act for myself, papa. I ought not to marry at all, if I am incapable of managing such a little matter as this for myself."

He puts his hand under my chin and lifts my face up for the purpose of inspecting it more closely. Then he kisses me and says—

"As you will, my child; you have a motive, I suppose, for this, and I'm sure that whatever motive you have is good. Now for the sum; how much do you want?"

“Two hundred pounds—is that all! Claire would have been a much bolder beggar. Well, for your modesty’s sake, I’ll double the sum, Tim; for you must dress your part of Consul’s lady in silk attire—in brave array.”

“Papa! papa! papa!” One word more in this strain from him, and I shall break down, and make a most absolute confession. I am saved from taking this course, which would be ruinous to Theo, by papa saying prosaically—

“Let me see; I’ll write the cheque for you at once, and cash it for you to-morrow, pet; will that do?”

“Yes, that will do, thank you a thousand times;” and, with downcast eyes and aching heart, I leave my father’s presence.

Claire is not very far off. Claire captures me with a winning gesture and a winning word as I stumble upstairs, eager to gain the safety and solitude of my bed-room. For all the grace with which she accomplishes her end, I wish she had not done it when she says—

“Tim, dear, you’ve done something you’re ashamed of; what is it?”

Her face is glowing, her eyes are sparkling.

“I am not ashamed of what I’ve done,” I say resolutely.

“‘Of what you’ve done.’ Then you have succeeded? O Tim! my darling, tell me at once—have you got this money for——”

“For Theo, for *your* sake,” I interrupted. “He told me it was for your sake. But I’ve deceived papa, Claire, and Theo must be good to you to repay me for all this shame and misery.”

“Don’t cry, dear,” Claire says soothingly. “I wouldn’t have done it myself, because I’m to be Theo’s wife, and I shouldn’t like him to be able to say that I had ever done a mean thing; but what would have been mean in me is noble in you, Tim, and at least you’ll always find me grateful.”

I cannot answer her.

“I’ll go and tell Theo now that his little ambassador has worked his royal will. Send

him a sisterly message—say you're glad you've done it, won't you?"

"I am glad to have saved him," I sob; "but oh! Claire! papa has trusted us all our lives, and now——"

"The end justifies the means," Claire cuts in coldly. "Theo gets twitted for remaining on here at Ravensbourne, and yet no one has sufficient generosity to give him the means openly of going away. You're having done this will be his salvation, and mine, Tim—lay this flattering unction to your soul. You send your love to him, then, my pet," she adds with a kiss, "and I may tell him from you that he will have the money from his sister Tim to-morrow."

"You may tell him what you like," I say in my agony and impatience. So Claire leaves me with a light step to bear the good news to her lover, and I go to the glass, and scan my face, to see if the word Deceiver is not legibly written upon it.

CHAPTER II.

“YOU ARE AWFULLY GOOD.”

A DIVERSION occurs the day after I make my successful raid under false pretences upon my father's pocket. Papa goes up to town as he promised me he would do, and when he comes back he brings with him not only the four hundred pounds, but Mr. Murray! And I have to meet him as if I were glad that he has come!

During the whole of the day Theo has been so essentially himself, that I begin to doubt his having a single fear as to his future. I also begin to doubt his having the fervent desire to do something for Claire's sake with which he had impressed me yesterday. He is born apparently to

play the part of curled darling and favourite of fortune, and he treats the little effort I have made on his behalf as so entirely a matter of course, that I am astonished at myself for having expected any gratitude from him.

"You must have treated the trousseau question very cleverly," he says to me as soon as he can get me alone. "Claire tells me the way your father forked out at once, and I can tell you, little woman, I'm awfully pleased at your powers of diplomacy."

"At my powers of deception," I say indignantly.

"No, no, we'll have no hard words about it; you've done me a great kindness, and I shall never forget it, never forget what I owe to you. I'm not the kind of fellow to turn round and revile a woman for being weak on my account; I know that you've done this because—well! because you think too much of me; but I'm grateful to you, Tim, and I'll never turn round upon you!"

His magnanimity simply paralyses me! Have I fallen so low for love of him, that his nature can dare to pity and despise me?

I don't ask this question aloud, I ask it of my own conscience, and to my joy my true conscience tells me “No.” What I have done I have done for Claire's sake, for his good! My love for him, ruinous as it may be to myself, will never lead me to do anything that may rebound upon and be hurtful to him!

Fraught with this feeling I turn from him, that he may not read my thoughts aright, and so gain more power over me, and I say—

“You could never turn on me for trying to help Claire; and till you do well, Theo, till you're free and independent and working for yourself, Claire will never be happy. You must—you will do something good for her sake?”

“By Jove! I'll do it for my own,” he says, “but they won't give me the chance. It's no use their thinking of sticking me down

to business; I can't stand routine, and I can't suck up to snobs because they happen to be in power and to have patronage. I can deal with gentlemen, but I can't deal with fellows whose women-folk stumble over their H's; I ought to have gone in for diplomacy——”

“You'd have had to subdue your magnificent ideas a little if you had,” I suggest.

“Ah! your notions on the subject are derived from Murray,” he replies superbly. “Consuls have to do a lot of unpleasant work, but as an unpaid *attaché* to an embassy, I could have adjusted my angles to my niche very well indeed.”

“But to be that you must have a fortune of your own,” I say aghast. And he answers, patronizingly—

“Of course, dear; no other fellow in my position would have been short-sighted enough to have engaged himself to Claire—a girl whose face is her fortune. Not but that I am quite contented with mine in getting her.”

Oh, Claire! what are we all about? I ask the question of myself, but I cannot answer it; and I am still trying, vainly trying to think it out, when Mr. Murray comes.

He is a delightful friend. He tells us such a number of interesting things in such an interesting way, that he harmonizes our circle marvellously. Above all—oh, be joyful!—he does not attempt to monopolize me. He makes no special claim on either my time or attention, and how grateful I am to him for this, until Theo says—

"He looks upon you as part of the gear it will be well for him to take out to his consulate. I shouldn't like that, if I were you, Tim. He's all very well, but he must remember that we're granting him an awful favour in letting you go to him at all. It seems to me that he should show he sets a higher value on it."

He fumes and throws himself into an affectionate fuss about me; but somehow or other I can't help feeling that, however

wanting in chivalrous devotion to me Mr. Murray may be, he would never attempt to make me deceive my father. I have done this for Theo, and I am coward enough to try and brace myself to bear the stings of conscience, by telling myself that I have done it for Claire.

Calmly as I can, I say—

“I think, Theo, that the less we say about Mr. Murray and my future life the better; you will never try to make me look upon either in the best light, and—I have to live my life, you know. You can make it more bitter, but you can never make it one bit the brighter for me; let me alone.”

I regret it the instant I have made my appeal. Theo's vanity is flattered by my implied admission of the sway he holds over me. His vanity is flattered, but his heart is not touched. His sorrow at my being pained is altogether overruled and trodden down by his pleasure in having the power to pain me.

He sees how deeply I am stung, and he is so skilful in extracting a sting at once.

“Can’t I make it a bit the brighter for you, Tim? then my will is very much weaker than I believe it to be, that’s all I can say. My sweetest friend, why, you gave me your help when Claire refused me hers! do you think I am ungrateful? do you think I don’t love you for what you have done, my darling?”

I find breath to utter the words—

“Not for what I have done;” and as he is a gentleman, he responds—

“I didn’t mean that—I didn’t mean to insult you by implying that you had purchased my liking. No, no, Tim: I gauged you the day I came here first, and I’ve never found my measure faulty. There’s only one thing I am sorry for, and that is that you should have taken Claire into your confidence respecting this swim we’re in about getting the money from your father.”

I shrink appalled from him as he speaks, I feel that I am in the toils.

"It was for Claire's sake I did it," I cry; "you know that; you told me that yourself."

"Yes, but Claire will never acknowledge a debt of that sort," he says, as he proceeds with cautious cruelty to nip the end off a cigar. "Claire is an awfully conscientious girl—she wants me to be without fear and without reproach before your father. I am grateful to you, dear—more grateful than I can express, but Claire would have thought better of you if you hadn't given me a helping hand in what she considers to be the perpetration of a swindle. However! the thing is done now, and I am *awfully* obliged to you, and we will say no more about it."

I can say no more about it, for I am dumb!—dumb with amazement and grief that the two whom I love best in the world should be so unutterably wanting in the power of appreciating my share in the transaction. To hear Theo speak one could be led to imagine that it was myself I had served in being untrue to all my instincts. I can't

attempt to right myself, I am dumb, and he thinks me ill-tempered.

"Don't show airs about it, because I don't garble facts," he says in a fine argumentative way. "I tell you I think you were awfully kind to do it for me ; you wouldn't think the better of me if I told you I thought it was the right kind of thing for a girl to do, now would you ? "

I feel hunted down, insulted beyond all my powers of bearing insult, yet I will not turn traitor and ruin him with my father. I remind me of one friend who will always be leal and trusty, who will always forgive and aid me, however deeply I may err.

"I will tell Sydney Dale what I have done," I say to myself, and as soon as I name him I feel safe.

"Now, don't you go making mistakes, and unburdening your heart to Murray," Theo goes on without regarding my silence. "He's an awfully clever fellow when he's got his pen in his hand—if he can hold it steadily ; but he'd talk a *Saturday Review* article about

the affair, and give it an importance it doesn't possess ; moreover, if it comes to that, you like me a long way better than you'll ever like him, and you're not a girl to play a fellow you like false."

It is ingeniously put, but it goes beyond the line of my forbearance. He taunts me with the very thing which should give me the strongest claim upon every gentlemanly feeling of which he is possessed.

"I am not a girl to play false to any one, whether I like him or not," I answer ; " but this is the last secret I'll ever share with you, Theo, for you don't leave me either Claire or my self-respect to turn to in this trouble and uncertainty which I've gone into on your account."

"Now, don't get melodramatic," he laughs, and his eyes sparkle merrily with fun and satisfaction at the way in which he is carrying everything before him. "Do the blank verse and melodramatic business with Murray as much as you like, when you're in your garden of roses, over in

the sunny South ; but while you're my own fetterless sister Tim Vincent here, in the 'hardy north,' be what you always have been the whole way through—the most sensible girl it has ever been my lot to meet. Now perhaps I've kept you here long enough ; I don't want to get a rise out of Claire's jealousy."

"How you insult us both !" I say as savagely as I can bring myself to say it to him ; but he merely laughs, throws away the end of his cigar (he has smoked it out—he never forfeits one half-inch of pleasure), and nods farewell to me as he goes out of the room to call Claire for her usual before-dinner stroll with him.

It is soon after this that Mr. Murray comes in with papa, comes in with a coat on that makes him look as broad as he is long, and a little out of breath from the effect of the sharp walk up from the station. By the time the two travellers are ready for dinner, dinner is ready for us ; and during dinner, though he makes me his theme and

winds about me in graceful language, he does not distress me by any personal demonstration. After dinner the wine is good, and papa is a capital audience—I have no *tête-à-tête* to fear!

I force my thoughts away from the remembrance of the fraud I have committed upon my father, and am singing light-heartedly with Claire when the gentlemen come into the drawing-room. All my light-heartedness flees when Mr. Murray comes to me, and, in a louder, more assured voice than he has ever addressed me in before, says—

“They’ve given me a Spanish town instead of the sweet Italian one I coveted; but it’s not bad—it’s on the shores of the blue Mediterranean of my youth. I have to take up my appointment very soon, and—you’ll be ready to go with me, won’t you, my child?”

I shrink from him as lover, but I do like him so much as friend. Oh! for the power to recall that hour in which my wilful reck-

less nature led me to pledge myself to him. I know his honourable, chivalrous character so well, that I feel sure that one appeal, the lightest appeal, would be sufficient to make him release me. At the same time I feel sure that the appeal would hurt him horribly, and so I can't make it.

“Yes,” I say, “I shall be quite ready;” and I smile a sickly smile, and try to think that my life will not be more of a colourless blank with him than it would be with any one else—since it can't be passed with the only one who could have put warmth and colour into it.

“Your father has been telling me what a modest sum you asked him for your outfit,” he says in a matter-of-fact way. “He has been very generous, Tim; you won't require to be very well rigged in the out-of-the-way place we're going to, so if I were you I'd keep at least half of it for a future rainy day.”

Something in the whole tone of his speech grates upon and disappoints me. I

am inexperienced in these matters, but it does strike me that he is not striving to make me look at the future, which he has arranged for me in a fair light. Can it be possible that he has awakened to a sense of the incongruity of such a marriage as ours will be? Now that the glamour of the sunshine on the summer sea at Brighton has passed away, does he perchance reflect that his ways of life and mine can never be bound up in one satisfactory sheaf? If he will only frankly tell me that these are his convictions, how delightedly will I confess to him that they are mine also! That remark of his about a rainy day has sent me down to the most dismal depths of depression. Am I going into poverty, among other things, with him? Why am I such a coward that I dare not speak the few words that would set me free? He is a gentleman to the very core of his heart, and he would understand me at once, and would release me promptly, if I only made the desire that he should do so manifest to him. But "out and for

shame” on my infirmity of purpose! I tell myself that, though I may do it finally, I cannot do it yet. And so this evening passes.

I have been in my room about ten minutes when Claire comes in and tells me that the others have all gone to bed, and that Theo is waiting to receive the money from me in the library. I have counted out the notes, and I push them towards her, but she says—

“ No, no ! it must not pass through my hands; you must take them to him yourself.”

“ When I have done that will you promise for him and for yourself that you will never try to make me his tool again, Claire ? ” I ask imploringly; and Claire tells me “ not to be tragic, and to make haste down to Theo.” So, accompanied by her, I go down to the man to whom I have been rendered slavish by love.

I am choking, trembling with nervousness, with an awful dread of some undefined evil growing out of this transaction. My teeth chatter, my limbs quiver, and I cling to

Claire convulsively for physical support. Theo, on the contrary, is perfectly calm and pleased. He thanks me with the words, "Dear little thing, awfully good you are!" and a hasty kiss, and he neither sees nor cares for the fact of my being shaken to the centre of my soul with fear and remorse! And the heaviest trouble I had upon my young head on the day when Theo first crossed my path was that I had heard Aunt Helen call me "unattractive."

"Theo will break the fact of his departure to papa and all of them at breakfast to-morrow morning, and go up by the twelve o'clock train," Claire informs me; and Theo adds—

"And look here, Tim, dear, mind you look innocent and surprised. If they fancy you had any foreknowledge of the matter, they may begin asking all sorts of questions, and I don't think you would come with flying colours out of the examination."

I am heart-broken, shattered, by his ruthlessness, but I refrain from wording the

agony I feel. It would hurt Claire to know how unhappy I am, and never shall Claire be hurt intentionally by me.

"I'll follow you up in two minutes," Claire says as she clasps and kisses me, and I rejoice in the permission to go and leave the room with flying feet. I look round at Theo as I gain the door, and I see him counting over the bank-notes, looking brighter, more brilliant and beautiful, than I have ever seen him look before, and I try to take comfort in the thought that he owes his happiness to me.

The next day both he and Mr. Murray go up to town by the mid-day train, and we are alone again without a guest to break up the family routine for the first time since Theo's first appearance among us. Now that he is gone my nerves resettle themselves; and a feeling of almost peace and safety sets in when Sydney Dale comes home, bringing with him his married sister, Mrs. Tierney.

CHAPTER III.

“I AM SO GLAD—FOR HIM.”

SEVERAL weeks have elapsed since Claire and I took leave of our respective lovers, and we have quite resumed our dear intimate sisterly relations with one another. Mr. Murray still sustains a brilliant and cultivated correspondence with me, but his letters resemble first-rate journalism more and more every week. I like them, for I in my ignorance cannot be expected to respond to them in any but the tersest way. Papa likes them too : he says he shall feel that there is a literary blank in his life, when that long-looked-for appointment is given and taken, and I have gone to share it with Mr. Murray, and the brilliant letters cease.

Theo's letters to Claire are very frequent, but they are not public property by any means. No one but Claire would miss them if they ceased. Whatever intelligence he gives her, she guards zealously, even from me. She does not even tell me whether he is doing well or ill; she only tells me that he is "working hard for her."

Christmas has come, and gone; the crocuses and snowdrops, and, above all, the hounds, are out in full force. I say, "above all, the hounds," because since Sydney Dale's return Claire and I have taken greatly to hunting under the chaperonage of Mrs. Tierney, and under the safe guidance of Sydney.

These beautiful bright February days, when we four ride happily along the roads, whose hedges are blooming already with the yellow aconite and blue periwinkle, and the woods where little clumps of pure white snowdrops lift up their graceful heads to greet us, and our horses in their stride brush aside the elegant *daphne laureola*, will never be

forgotten. They are very sweetly, purely, truly happy days. Mrs. Tierney, devoted as she is to her reckless husband and her Irish home, is very happy to find herself back for a time in the cradle of her race, in the midst of peace and plenty, and with a brother whom she loves with a tender warmth that does equal honour to him and to her. While as for Claire and myself—she evidently is nursing some bright hope in her heart that gilds the pleasant present, even more richly than current circumstances would gild it; and I, having no particularly bright future to look forward to, enjoy the fleeting hours, and gather such spring roses as are about my path gladly and gratefully.

To tell the truth, there is intense comfort in Sydney's companionship. He is more than friend, more than brother, and less than lover, and I find it very delightful to stand on this neutral ground, with the knowledge if I overstep the border on either side, if I either go back or go on, I shall be in safety. Outwardly he is the

frankest, kindest, most heart-whole friend that ever a girl had. In his heart he is at my feet! and I know it!

I think there are few men like him, unless they are bound by the powerful fetters of *esprit de corps* to the absent, authorized lovers. Syd knows that Mr. Murray has no more hold on the sentimental part of my nature than has the horse I am riding—not half so much, perhaps, for I thrill with pride and pleasure in having attained the mastery over my horse's spirit, and I feel no such thrill and pleasure in having attained it over Mr. Murray's. Nevertheless, Syd makes no attempt to sap my allegiance, though I gather from Mrs. Tierney that I have been, that I am, and that I always shall be, the one woman in the world to him.

There is a lawn-meet one day at Syd's place, Dalesmeet, and papa has ridden over with Claire and me to the breakfast, at which Mrs. Tierney is presiding. As is usual at such meets, we have a grand gathering, and a very poor prospect of

sport. Notwithstanding this last, I feel in unusually high spirits as I jump from my chestnut mare "Kismet," at the door of Dalesmeet House, and am met by Sydney, who must have kept a look-out for our arrival, as he runs from the dining-room where his guests are, the instant we pull up.

"We have half the county here, Tim," he begins. "More ladies out than we've had for the season, and some one you'll be surprised to see," he stoops down to add in a whisper.

Claire and papa are engaged with a group who have come out to welcome the beauty of the district. I feel that I must watch her, as I ask him anxiously—

"Who is it?"

"Theo Bligh," he replies. "He's staying, it seems, with Sir Harold Torrens. Does Claire know it?"

"I don't know," I answer, but I feel sure that she does not; and so as we go through the hall I take advantage of the throng and the hum it is making, to say—

“ Do you know that Theo is staying with Sir Harold Torrens ? ”

She shakes her head, and compresses her lips, and I have just time to whisper—

“ They’re here ; don’t mind it ! ” the advice forces itself through my lips, and I am glad to see that it acts like a spur on Claire. Her head goes up, her colour rises, her lovely violet eyes sparkle and dilate. She enters the room where the flower of the county are assembled, the brightest beauty in it.

We are greeted warmly by Syd’s sister, we are surrounded instantly by the best set in the room, and for a moment or two I can’t see Theo. Then he flashes upon my vision in a faultless hunting-suit, the most striking-looking man in the room, and he is standing by an equally striking-looking woman. He catches sight of us at once, and comes forward elastically at once, making his wonderful eyes sparkle a thousand welcomes. He grasps my hand in silence, then passes on to Claire—to Claire who is the cynosure

of all eyes—and my heart leaps with joy to see that he does show that he is proud of her.

Then I turn my eyes again in the direction of the lady he has just left, and I know that I am looking at beautiful, graceful, popular Lady Torrens.

What do I see? A woman above the middle height, well and gracefully formed, and capable of carrying herself commandingly whenever she cares to do it—a sweet, frank, fair face, lighted up by a pair of fearless grey-blue eyes that are well outlined by arched brows and long dark lashes — a mobile, restless mouth, and an ever-varying expression — a woman that I like at once for her free grace and beauty, for her manifest fearlessness, and above all for that dominant characteristic of *generosity* which is so visibly stamped upon her, that I, stranger as I am, recognise it, and respond to it, and suffer the prophetic truth to sink into my soul concerning it, that it will sway me whithersoever it will, should it ever care to do so.

By the time we are ready for the start I can see that Theo has quite made his peace with Claire about having kept her in the dark as to his present place of sojourn. He is most *empresse* in his manner of devoting himself to her—puts her up on her horse with the most tender assiduity, adjusts reins and habit and stirrup with the skill and celerity of a lover and a horseman, and keeps close by her off-side for the next hour. But when we get away after a stout old dog-fox, he shoots ahead of her. Theo Bligh, to be happy, must take a prominent place, must be the first in everything. Sir Harold Torrens' hunting stables are famous, and Theo has judiciously selected a splendid mount from them for himself. Accordingly, now he leads the field, and Claire is well contented in her pride for him that he should do so, although the ambition which urges him on separates him from her!

The one thing in which I excel my sister Claire is the art of riding. She has a pretty graceful seat, and she can look quite at

home in the saddle while her horse pursues beaten tracks and does nothing unlooked for. As papa—guided by Sydney—has taken care to provide her with a horse that is exactly suited to her requirements, she always does look perfectly at home, and graceful, in her saddle, and as she knows the country well, and is well piloted, she sees as much of the run as do those of us who ride straight.

It is different with me. Kismet has been my deliberate choice, in spite of her bad name for a certain nervousness of temperament, which amounts at times to diabolical temper. She is a thoroughbred, was overrun on the race-course at two years' old, and has never learnt to be way-wise. She is fidgety, she gets hot about nothing, she has bursts of most perplexing skittishness at most inopportune times. Nevertheless, I love Kismet, for she is as fleet as the wind, and, when she can command her temper, she flies her hedges like a bird.

It happens that she starts in an unusually

good temper this day, and so, with Syd keeping by me stride for stride, we are in a very good place, not far behind Theo Bligh. But now, creeping up to us faster and faster, and presently sweeping by us in a way that makes Kismet leap in her gallop, there comes Lady Torrens on her celebrated horse Wildfire, and in a minute or two Theo no longer leads the field alone, for Lady Torrens is well up with him.

Whether the vague feeling of dissatisfaction which affects me at this sight communicates itself in some subtle way or other to Kismet or not, I cannot say. But from the moment of being passed by Lady Torrens' black horse, the mare goes wildly. In vain I give her the most loving encouragement to regain her composure with both hand and voice. She becomes almost uncontrollable, refuses a hedge, and takes me for a fierce burst in a perfectly contrary direction to that in which I desire to go. In fact, if I were not more at home in my saddle than I am in any place in this world, something

unpleasant would probably happen to either Kismet or me.

Her fury expends itself in a rushing gallop and a series of plunging bounds that strains her girths severely in a heavy field, and I come out of the encounter rather excited, and, to tell the truth, rather elated. To my surprise, Sydney meets me with an anxious face, and his voice falters as he says—

“Tim, let me change our saddles. You must never ride that she-demon again.”

“She hasn’t done anything very bad to-day, Syd,” I plead.

“She’s not a safe mount for you,” he says. “She’s lost you the best part of the run, and in watching you I’ve lost sight of the field altogether.”

“I’m sorry she has cost *you* the run,” I say humbly; “but we shall soon hear of them; we’ll soon pick them up. They’re sure to go away to Dogberry Gorse—they always do from your place, it seems to me. Kismet will go like an arrow now her temper’s over.”

"Her temper is sleeping, like a tired tigress, for a time," he says. "It's safe to wake up again. Without any nonsense, Tim, she's a dangerous beast, and to please me, dear, you won't ride her after to-day, will you? She stopped short in her gallop just now as if she had been shot. You're bound to come out of your saddle some day or other, if she tries that trick often. You won't ride her after to-day, will you?"

"If I sell her, some other woman may ride her, and I couldn't bear to hear of it; I couldn't bear the sight of it, Syd," I plead.

"Jealous of her, are you? or vainly jealous of your reputation of being able to manage the most unmanageable beast that was ever bitted? How's that, Tim? you're not jealous in—in other matters."

"No, I'm not," I say confidently; "at least, if I have the feeling, I'm ashamed of it."

"But you nurse it about Kismet. Well, look here, let me have her; you'll be sure

then that no other woman shall ever ride her, and I'll get you something that will compensate you for the loss of Kismet."

I am unaccountably reluctant to accede to his proposition, but he presses it so hard that after a time I give in, and he takes my promise that I will send Kismet over to his stables to-morrow, and leave the choice of the horse that is to replace her to him.

"I'll make it all right with your father; he has been nervous all along about your riding the mare, I know," he says. Then we drop the subject, for we catch sight of a few stragglers who are land-marks to tell us which way the field has gone; and Kismet justifies my statement concerning her—her temper has expended itself for this day, and she does go along as straight as an arrow.

We kill this day at Dogberry Gorse, and the field disperses here. We began late, and have had a long run, and there is nothing more to be done this day. We find ourselves riding homeward in the dying

light with Sir Harold and Lady Torrens and Theo; and presently papa, who has known Sir Harold on the magisterial bench, introduces him to Claire and me, and a minute after Sir Harold introduces us to his wife.

We soon fall into the following order. The roads are somewhat narrow, and we pair off; Sir Harold and papa lead the way, Lady Torrens and I follow with Sydney, and behind us ride Claire and Theo Bligh.

Pretty Lady Torrens, who is an ardent sportswoman and a perfect rider, has enjoyed her day to the uttermost. She has been perfectly carried, she has been in a good place all the day, she has been in at the death, and she has won the brush. Her manner is as frank and friendly as her face, and she enters into conversation with me freely.

"I've often heard of your sister's beauty," she says to me, "but I've never seen her before. It's a treat to look at anything so exquisite and know that it's young, and

likely to last, and adorn the world for a long time. I wonder I've never seen her or you before."

"We don't go out much," I reply.

"But you ought to go out much—of course you ought. You don't contemplate remaining the Miss Vincents—or Misses Vincent, whichever is right—all your lives, do you?"

She asks it with an air of laughing amusement, and I feel sure that the rumour of our unpropitious engagements have not reached her ears. I, as a rule, am very chary of speaking of either Claire's plighted troth or my own. But on this occasion I am prompted to go on, and say—

"Haven't you heard Theo Bligh speak of us?"

"Mr. Bligh speak of you!—never! Did you know him before to-day?"

She looks me steadily in the face as she says this. There is a look of surprise mingled with one of inquiry in her eyes. Evidently she is astonished at my having called him by

his Christian name. Equally evidently she wants to know all about my intimacy with him.

“ We have known him for some months,” I say as quietly as I can. “ He stayed with us at Ravensbourne for many weeks ; I wonder he hasn’t mentioned us to you, for he is engaged to my sister Claire.”

Some instinct restrains me from looking at her as I say this, but I know that she shudders. In a moment after, though, her vivacious voice rings out upon the air with the words—

“ He has indeed shown the most wonderful modesty in keeping anything that redounds so greatly to his honour a secret.” She says it in a pretty, eager way, in which there is not the semblance of affectation, but in which I fancy I discern a little ring of some true metal that she does not wish all the world to hear, or understand. When I do look at her, she is bending forward, caressing Wildfire’s neck, speaking gently and lovingly to her horse as if she felt glad

that there was something that was tender and true to turn to.

The instant she becomes aware that I am looking at her she turns on me with a glance that is at the same time bright and tearful.

“ You see, I’m a little disappointed,” she begins in her eager impulsive way. “ I thought he had made such a friend of me—I thought he would have told me everything, at least such a thing as this ; but I am so glad—for him.”

CHAPTER IV.

LADY TORRENS CALLS.

"I WAS never so tired in my life!" are the first words I hear from Claire when she gets home this day. After parting with the Torrens, when our roads branch off, Sydney Dale and I ride home briskly, and he and I are having a comfortable cup of tea by papa's study fire when Claire and papa come in.

"I was never so tired in my life!" Claire repeats, throwing aside all my attempts at assisting her to take off her hat and gloves.

"We've had a very light day, too!" Sydney remarks.

"Do you call it a light day?" she retorts.
"Well, to me a day that begins with a mid-

day breakfast and finishes at Dogberry Gorse is a very heavy day."

"You certainly seem to have had enough of it," papa says.

"I have, papa," she answers piteously "enough of hunting, and enough of everything else; I was never so utterly worn out in my life."

"I am glad you are tired, and I hope that there will be an end of this tearing after the hounds soon," Aunt Helen puts in. She has come into the room during Claire's last speech, and in contrast with us—a pair of lissom, slender-limbed, habited girls—she looks more like a large white milch cow than ever.

Claire is standing before the fire, one slight foot rests on the fender, one delicate hand grasps the mantle-board. How I wish that Theo was here to mark the beauty of these points of hers.

"You did upset me so, Tim," she says, turning straight upon me suddenly. "When I saw Kismet go off in that way I was sure

there would be a scene, and I do so heartily detest a scene."

"But neither Tim nor Kismet made one," papa says dryly.

"No, but I had the fear for an indefinite period that they would," Claire says hastily, and then she runs from the room quickly, and I follow her, for I see that she is wounded and sore, and that it is not about Kismet or me that she is so.

She has pitched her hat down, and is unbuttoning her habit with rapid fingers when I reach her room.

"Claire," I begin, "let me help you. Dear, don't be frightened about me and Kismet any more; I am going to send her to Syd to-morrow, for he pronounces her an unsafe mount for me."

She gets rid of her habit, and wearily casts the folds of her dressing-gown about her, and says—

"I wish Syd were as fond of me as he is of you; how I'd turn to him, the dear true fellow, in any trouble!"

“ So I do,” I say.

“ And so I can’t—nor would I if I could, if it comes to that. No, I’d rather hug my woe to my heart than share it with any one else.”

“ Has Theo annoyed you ? ” I ask.

“ ‘ Annoyed ’ is not the word : ‘ I can’t be annoyed with Theo for choosing to stay with old, disreputable Sir Harold Torrens if it pleases him to do so ; but he ought to have told me he was there, he ought not to have allowed Lady Torrens to visibly triumph—— ”

“ Claire ! ” I interrupt.

“ Oh yes, I know, she’s a married woman and her fame is sacred, but Sir Harold *is* old and ailing, and Lady Torrens may soon be in the market with a large fortune. She *must* be mean-spirited to trifle with an engaged man.”

“ Do you mean with Theo ? ” I ask. “ If so, let me tell you she didn’t know till I told her this evening that he was engaged. Don’t make a foe of her in your imagination, Claire.”

Claire laughs scornfully.

“She has evidently fascinated you,” she says—“fascinated you into the folly of believing her. How credulous you must be ! Theo tried to disarm my suspicions about her flirting with him by telling me that she ‘wasn’t the kind of woman to hang her chains about a fellow whom she knew to be engaged.’ How does *that* agree with her statement.”

“Not at all,” I am compelled to admit. But at the same time I have a higher opinion of Lady Torrens’ veracity than I have of Theo’s. However, it would be unkind to tell Claire this ; besides, putting aside the unkindness to Claire, I shrink from the pain I should inflict upon myself in wording any sentiment that is derogatory to Theo. He is very faulty, and I am beginning to see him with clearer vision every day. But though the scales have fallen from my eyes, I love him still—how I love him still !

“Has he got anything to do yet ?” I

venture to ask presently; and Claire rises up impatiently and begins to pace up and down the room.

“Got anything to do! Theo’s not the kind of man to find employment for himself; it must be found for him and thrust upon him. Oh, dear! what will my life be with him, I wonder! He began lamenting his want of money to-day as we rode home, and when I asked him why he didn’t work and make some for himself, he said ‘he had no trading blood in his veins.’ Tim, what a happy thing it would be if I could leave off loving Theo.”

Tears of wounded love and pride well from her lovely eyes as she says this; and as I have no comfort to offer her, I remind her, prosaically, that it is time she began to dress for dinner.

“I’m not going down,” she says abruptly. “I’m too tired to rouse myself, and I can’t stand being conjectured about and pitied.”

“Shall I come up to you after dinner?”
I ask.

“No, no; I shall only talk myself into a more miserable frame of mind than I’m in already if you come up; besides, I want to write to Theo—I parted with him very coldly, and if I don’t write and remove the impression that I’m annoyed with him, he won’t come here to-morrow; his is such a bright nature,” she adds lovingly, “that he would rather keep apart from any one, however much he loved the person, than hear or say any fault-finding words.”

She looks happier at once, now that she has begun to excuse him, and I leave her with a comparatively lightened heart. It would be too terrible if after all Claire and Theo should come to misunderstand each other, for she loves him with a love that will leave her poor indeed if it is unrequited.

Sydney Dale, rather to my surprise, has mastered all the incidents and grasped the whole dramatic situation of the little domestic piece of plot and passion which is at present engaging the interest of our house.

“Claire is a little distressed at Theo’s

being with Torrens, isn't she?" he asks me. "I'm afraid if Sir Harold gets him on the turf that Theo will never do any good for himself."

"Do you mean that he'll lead Theo on to bet?" I ask anxiously.

"Well, Sir Harold is a regular racing man, you know," Sydney answers, "and if he sees a young fellow is well inclined to fling away his money after horses, he's not the man to balk him."

"But Theo has no money to throw away," I urge, as I remember how ignominiously Theo had obtained command of the two hundred pounds.

"But no one, to hear Theo talk, would guess at that fact," he laughs; "besides, he has been lucky in his betting transactions lately—he told me so himself."

"Poor Claire!" I sigh.

"Don't be distressed," Sydney says kindly. "Lady Torrens loves riding, and takes a keen interest in every race in which her husband's horses run; but she loves fair

play better, and she won't see any young fellow tempted to take the road to ruin if she can help it. Sir Harold wouldn't put himself out of the way for any one, but she would."

I am a little reassured by this statement, but my mind is not set perfectly at rest. Lady Torrens' will may be good to do the good deed of putting a check on Theo's spirit of gambling, but I know Theo too well to suppose that she will have the power to divert him from any path he desires to tread. He may seem to act under her guidance, but in reality Theo Bligh will please himself under all circumstances.

Claire is quite her own bright sweet self again after a night's rest, and after having held out the olive-branch in writing to Theo. She sends the letter over to Sir Harold Torrens' quite early, before breakfast; but the morning passes away, and no Theo appears in response to it. But just as we are rising from luncheon, Sir Harold and Lady Torrens come to call.

"I have lost no time in coming to offer you my congratulations," Lady Torrens says coming up heartily to Claire and me. "Miss Vincent, your sister told me of your engagement, but she didn't mention her own; I gained that knowledge, though, from Mr. Bligh."

Then she goes on to ask if we are going to be married on the same day, and to shudder in a very unaffected way when she hears that my lot is to be cast in a far-off dull town, on the shores of the Mediterranean.

"The 'sunny south' is all very well in books," she says; and I know at once that Theo has been giving an imitation of the poetical side of Mr. Murray's manner, and I feel abashed and uncomfortable; "but how will you do without the hunting? I watched you yesterday, and I saw that you sent your heart over everything first, and your horse was bound to follow it. What a lovely creature your mare is."

"She's mine no longer," I say patheti-

cally. "Sydney Dale fancies she's unsafe, and so he has persuaded me to send her to him, and he's going to get me another."

"I am glad of it," she says quickly. "I'm glad—I'm delighted that she's safely away from you. To tell the truth, though I wished to see you both again, I really came to-day to speak about Kismet."

"You know her name?" I ask in astonishment.

"I gave her the name. Two years ago my husband had a string of horses up in Yorkshire, and on the race-course a horse of his that he had backed very heavily was beaten by several lengths by this chestnut mare. He made up his mind to buy her, and got her with much less difficulty than he anticipated—the fact is, her temper is so vile that no one will put money on her, though she's fleet as the wind. It is a relief to me to find that you're safe from her mad caprices."

"Tim, you've had a lucky escape, thanks to Syd," Claire says warmly; and then she

goes on to tell Lady Torrens how nervous Kismet's escapade had made her yesterday, and how, in consequence, she had made herself disagreeable to Theo Bligh during the ride homewards.

"Mr. Bligh ought to have come with us to-day," said Lady Torrens; "but he altered his mind about it just as we were starting. Do you know"—she hesitates for a moment, then adds rather anxiously—"that he rides in the steeple-chase next Saturday?"

We shake our heads.

"They are all gentlemen-riders. Most of them have ridden several steeple-chases in Ireland, where they go at racing speed over a stiff hunting-country. Is Mr. Bligh accustomed to the work? I never saw him in the saddle till yesterday, and then it struck me that he went wildly and rashly."

Lady Torrens speaks so thoughtfully and earnestly, that I fathom at once that she does distrust Theo's prowess and skill as a horseman—his courage no one can doubt. But Claire resents the implication that

her hero is less than perfect in every position.

"If he has undertaken to ride, he'll do it well, be sure of that," she says; and then she asks, "Whose horse is it?"

"Sir Harold's, I am sorry to say," Lady Torrens replies; and Claire colours with vexation. And presently, as we all go out together to show Lady Torrens our green-houses, and the otter-pool, and some of the other things for which we are famous at Ravensbourne, Claire whispers to me—

"She ought to be proud of his riding their horse, instead of being afraid that he'll lose them the race. I believe she has taken a dislike to him since she heard he is engaged. I can't bear her, Tim; I wish I had never heard of her."

Claire is unmistakably, unjustly, obstinately, jealous! Her manner grows constrained, and presently she leaves me to entertain Lady Torrens, and makes an excuse to go back to the house.

As soon as she is gone, Lady Torrens

turns from the close inspection of the ferns, and says to me—

“Is Mr. Bligh usually as reticent on the subject of his friends and his plans as he has proved himself lately? I am more disappointed in his character than I can express to you. In my estimation he is proving himself selfish, vain, and deceitful. But your sister’s heart is bound up in him, is it not?”

I tell her “Yes,” and I abstain from adding the truth that so is mine also.

“Poor girl! may he prove himself worthy of her eventually. Is he well off?”

“Not at all,” I say eagerly.

“Then, again, he has not been candid,” she says in a vexed tone. “I told him the other day that I shouldn’t be a true friend to him unless I told him that for a young man who has to make his way in the world, ours was not a good house to stay at; nor was my husband’s racing, betting set a good set for him to be in. His answer was that his way was ‘made for him in the world,’

and that if he lost his own fortune, he could always 'pull himself together by making a rich marriage;'—and all the time he is engaged to your sister! He is too utterly contemptible!"

"I wonder why he never told you about Claire," I say musingly; and Lady Torrens does not help me to a solution of the problem. But she stoops forward and kisses me on the forehead, and says—

"Theo Bligh, though he often talks without a motive, never holds his tongue without one, dear. But now I know how he is situated I *will* take a stand: he shall not be led astray on the turf by any one connected with me, if I have any influence over either him or my husband."

And I thank her gratefully for this, for I know that she means it, and means it well; and just as I am doing this, Sir Harold and papa appear in the conservatory, and the horses are ordered round, and Lady Torrens and her husband ride away, and Clare and I stand on the steps watch-

ing them till they take the turn of the drive, and are out of sight. Then Claire says—

“Let us call the dogs and go down to the otter-pool; I want to have a long talk with you quietly.”

I accede to her proposition, and tremble !

CHAPTER V.

HEART-SICK.

GLAD even of this momentary diversion, I leave my sister, and run round to the stable-yard to call Music and Heartless. By way of further prolonging the time, I endeavour to unloose the big St. Bernard, Rescue, and I peep in for a moment at Kismet's empty stall. Poor Kismet! sorry as I am to lose her, I feel more oppressed by the prospect of this *tête-à-tête* walk with Claire than by anything else. I know that she is going to talk about Theo, and to take my opinion about Theo—or, rather, to ask it. For I love Theo with all his faults much too well to give her or any one else my real opinion concerning him.

Claire has not grown impatient, she has only become very much dejected when I rejoin her in the front of the house, and for a while she seems to be as glad as I am that we have the dogs to bestow our attention upon. But presently she sends the two otter-hounds off with a word in the direction of the river, gives Rescue her gloves to carry, and linking her hand in my arm begins to take me for my preliminary canter over the hot plough-shares. My ordeal has commenced, and I must get through it as honourably as I can for myself; but above all, I must get through it honourably for Theo, for the sake of her happiness!

"Has Lady Torrens been speaking to you of Theo?" she begins; "I know that she has, I needn't ask you. You've always told me everything, Tim darling, since we were tiny girls together; tell me the worst now."

"There's nothing bad to tell," I rejoin earnestly. "She said she thought a fast,

sporting set like her husband's, you know, was a bad set for a young man like Theo, now that she knows he's engaged."

"Now that she knows he's engaged!" Claire echoes scornfully. "So she's going to make him smart socially in her house 'now that she knows he's engaged!' If it's bad for him now, it was bad before these evil tidings came to her ears—officially."

"They had never come to her ears at all," I say bluntly.

"Nonsense!" Claire replies suspiciously; "but I won't argue that point with you. I only want you to understand that if she gives Theo a hint to leave her house and the society she suddenly declares to be dangerous to him now, I shall not like her the better for it; nor will Theo like you the better for having urged her on to take such a course."

I am so innocent of this of which I am accused, I am so shocked at the accusation, that I remain silent.

"What is it?" Claire goes on, with a

sudden access of emotion which seems to indicate an intensity of feeling which the circumstance hardly warrant—"what has he done, or what have I done, that you should plot and counterplot with a stranger about us? Lady Torrens came here to-day to find out from you whether or not there's a flaw in Theo. Tim, have you been false to him?"

"Neither to him nor to you," I find breath to say.

"I will believe you, I do believe you," poor Claire says, "but we women are all so weak, and—he liked you very much at one time, Tim, and tried to make you like him. I know all that, and—he's not a man to be easily forgotten."

She is cruel in her candour with which she lets me understand that he has told her of the conquest he achieved over me, without any special effort on his part—any special effort, that is, that was apparent to others. She is cruel, and he is cowardly! Some horrible instinct insists upon forcing

this explanation of their conduct upon me for a moment. The next I fling off its degrading influence, and am true to myself, and to them.

“If Theo were a man to be easily forgotten I shouldn’t wish you to be his wife,” I say; “and as for my being weak about him, I shall go on being weak about you both all my life, I hope.”

We are close by the river bank now, and the old habits of our childhood come back upon us. Rescue goes into the river after a stick, and Music and Heartless plunge their noses into the holes in the bank, utterly regardless of the fact of its not being the otter-hunting season. We are girls still, girls whose only misery so far has been that a reality has fallen short of our ideal. Our youth, our vitality asserts itself here in the open air, and we shout to Rescue and encourage the otter-hounds with all the force and energy, all the heart-whole enjoyment in the pursuit, which we expended upon it in former days before Theo Bligh

and Mr. Murray came to cumber us, the one with the burden of loving him, the other with the burden of being loved by him.

Presently Claire, growing tired of throwing dirty sticks into the river with her delicate hands for Rescue's amusement, stops that portion of the sport, and says to me—

“ You drift back into romping childhood very readily, Tim; do you realize what a change has come over us both since we used to come here at this time last year and find real pleasure in making the dogs our playfellows ? ”

“ I find real pleasure in making them my playfellows still, Claire,” I say deprecatingly. “ I shall feel parting with them awfully, awfully ! ” and as I speak I conjure up a vision of *all* the good-byes that will have to be spoken before I start for my new home under Mr. Murray's auspices, and I bless Rescue's fat honest head for being at hand for me to bury my flushed face and tearful eyes in it.

“ What's come to us,” Claire goes on

speculating, "that we're not as happy and contented as we were a year ago? We have the dogs, and the river, and each other, and our youth still, and other things in addition; why aren't we as happy as we were? Are you jealous of Mr. Murray?—is it that with you?"

I am giving all my strength to the task of breaking off a big out-growing root, where-with to lure Rescue into the river again. Nevertheless, I shake my head very energetically as I say emphatically.

"No!—I should like to be."

"No, you wouldn't—a thousand times no, you wouldn't," Claire says, throwing herself spiritedly into the argument. "Jealousy sears one's brightness so horribly. Who can be at one's best when you're watching for a word or a glance to be given to some one else? Do you know, Tim, I think jealousy is the real Hades."

"What an awful thing an eternity of being on that kind of ignominious look out would be!" I say laughingly.

"It's an awful thing to have a time of it here," Claire says; "it makes one so pitifully low. Fancy wanting to pull down one fellow-creature because you suspect another fellow-creature of preferring the first to yourself."

I throw my hardly gained stick away without regard to Rescue; I turn to my sister, and I *pray* to speak aright to her.

"I think you'd like a better woman than yourself to be preferred to you; but the 'better woman' will never be found, and so you're safe, you will never try to pull any one down."

"Then don't you try to build any one up in Theo's estimation against me," Claire says lightly but warningly; and out of the fulness of my heart, out of my firm belief in Claire's perfect ascendancy over Theo's mind, I say—

"I pity the woman who ever ranges herself against you in Theo's estimation—he wouldn't spare her, for he loves you."

"Don't give me false security," she says

anxiously; and the fear possesses me, that in order to be quite loyal to her, I cannot be loyal to him.

“I don’t like the idea of her assuming that she has influence enough over him even to keep him from evil,” my poor sister goes on peevishly, before I have made up my mind as to what I had better say; and I perceive that her malady is at its height, that the fever must expend itself, for that no cooling draughts of verbal wisdom from me will avail to allay it.

“I wish I knew some one who had sufficient influence over Mr. Murray to keep him from evil all the days of his life,” I say, with an attempt at a light-hearted laugh, which breaks down into a sort of sobbing gurgle that is anything but mirthful. “If such a person only exists, and will be kind enough to point out to him how unfit *I* am to be his wife and the companion of his exile, I feel as if I should be so happy that nothing would ever trouble me again.”

"Nonsense! that's all sham!" Claire says indignantly. "You'd get out of it if you were as tired of it as you profess to be."

"It's an awful thing to break an engagement in cold blood," I say musingly. "You write yourself down such an utter fool for having gone into it at all."

Claire's eyes flame, and all her beauty is transformed from its gentleness as she says—

"If that was the only thing that kept me back from breaking *my* engagement, wouldn't I do it at once! I'd 'write myself down a fool' without the slightest hesitation; but I love Theo's faults better than I ever should love any other man's good qualities, and so for my heart's sake I must keep to it—I love him so that I can't leave him."

Her words catch my ear, and recall some other words whose music has sunk into my soul, and I begin to half hum and half "howl," as Claire calls it, the words—

"What shall I do for thee?—weary thee?—leave thee?"—

Hum—hum—hum—hum, because I've forgotten the words. I relapse into song here—

“Love thee so dear that I only can leave thee.”

“That's a form my love will never take,” Claire says; “until he shows he's tired of me, I'll hold him as my very own before all the world. What form would your love take, Tim, if you doubted him—I mean, doubted any man—and loved him still?”

“I'd just ask him to clear away the doubt—to tell me if it were an idle or a well-founded one; and, if it were the last—if I found he had gone from me, Claire, well—I'd never go after him.”

“Wouldn't you hate him in that case?” Claire asks, setting her small teeth firmly together; “wouldn't you love to make him suffer? wouldn't you hurt him if you could? wouldn't you have revenge?”

My reckless, untutored nature lies down tamed, softened, and saddened inexpressibly as my sister speaks. My sweet, fair-faced sister is vindictive! The truth forces itself

upon me—she can hate where she has loved!

The idea of unloving is repugnant to my nature; the idea of placing revenge on the throne where love once sat is repulsive to me. I feel that I could leave Theo, that I could resign all prospect of ever seeing him again; that I would die rather than attempt to win him back; that I would serve him, if it were in my power to do so, until my life's end: but I could never hate him, nor try to harm him! How, then, can Claire, whom he has placed on the pedestal of his open regard, speak even in jest of doing these things! She must love herself better than she does him after all.

"Wouldn't you have revenge?" Claire repeats.

"I think I should say, 'I love thee so dear that I only can leave thee!'" I say, thinking it better to put forth my views in other people's words than in my own.

"I wish I could renounce Theo in that way," Claire says, subduing herself suddenly,

“but I can’t. I could only leave him under one condition—namely, that I left him for a man who could put me into a much better position than Theo can ever hope to touch.”

“No, you’ll never leave him in that way,” I say coaxingly. I cannot endure the idea of my sister ever treating this man with meanness, though my prophetic heart tells me that he is quite capable of treating her in any way that will best serve his own interest. Still, as I would rather myself be wronged than wrong another, I do earnestly hope that Claire may never be the aggressor—the one to play false—to break vows that were made in faith and love, and in the youth that should be so pure and loyal.

“You’ll never leave him for another man merely because the other man is rich and Theo is poor, will you, Claire darling?” I repeat. And poor Claire looks at me wistfully, and answers truthfully, with all semblance of hardness and worldliness banished from her manner.

"Something tells me that I shall never be parted from Theo, but it will be his 'will' to leave me—Tim, his interest to remain. Theo will never disgrace himself openly in the eyes of the world by jilting a girl like me; but if he can do it quietly, and get well paid for it, he's just the man 'to love and ride away!' at a moment's notice."

"Yet you love him still—better than anything in the world," I say confidently, for I judge her by myself, and *I* love him still, "better than anything in the world." Yes! better even than my own happiness, though I am still young enough for happiness to be an object to me.

"I wish I knew where this steeple-chase is to be ridden," Claire says, as we walk home; "it's so annoying to think of other people—other women—being there to flatter and encourage him, and of our being in the dark about it altogether."

"Lady Torrens won't be there to flatter and encourage him," I say.

“Nonsense ! she’s sure to be there. Most likely she has worked him her colours on jacket and cap—she’s just the kind of woman to do that sort of thing ; and she’ll tell him to ride for her favour, and urge him on to all sorts of foolish exploits. But we shall not be there to see the exhibition, that’s one comfort.”

But there evidently was no ‘comfort’ in this reflection for poor Claire, in spite of the energy of her assertion, and I grow heart-sick for her.

CHAPTER VI.

MY IDOL SLIPS.

THERE is a letter lying on my plate when I go down to breakfast the morning after my walk and talk with Claire, which takes away my appetite. It is from Mr. Murray, who evidently looks upon a wedding as a little incident which can be got over without being led up to by any absurd or conventional preliminaries. His own preparations for leaving his native land, and assuming the consular dignity, are completed, and he writes to tell me that he thinks we had better be married "next week!" I read on to this clearly worded expression of his desires and opinion, and then the words jumble themselves together, and the lines

seem to be swimming about before my eyes. I feel that the letter flutters; I feel that my eyeballs are floating in scalding tears that must not be shed; I feel—that they are all looking at me, and that I must say something presently.

“Why, Tim! what’s the matter?” Claire asks, leaning towards me.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head imploringly; “at least——”

Papa glances up from his paper, first at me, then at the epistle in my hand.

“Letter from Murray, eh!” he says. “What does he say?”

“That I’m to be married next week,” I blurt out; and if I were announcing my impending execution I could not feel more miserable, or speak more hopelessly.

Papa looks away from me abruptly, and jerks the paper nearer to his face; Aunt Helen gives forth the verdict, “Next week! Impossible!” and my twin sisters proclaim that they “have always said that Tim never would have her things ready whenever she

was married." Only Claire is silent. But she draws her chair nearer to mine, and takes one of my trembling hands in hers, and lets me feel that she does understand it all so fully that I may dare to speak to her.

"Not a bit of the trousseau begun even," Aunt Helen says. "Absurd as this marriage is in itself, both Mr. Murray and Tim seem to do all in their power to make all the circumstances attending it ridiculous."

"You see he's a Scotchman, and in Scotland you needn't be married at all to be married, you know—at least, if you say you'll be somebody's husband or wife, and somebody else hears you say it, it's quite as good as if——"

"You jumped over a broomstick," papa says, interrupting the twin who was expounding. "Remarkably lucid, Mabel, my dear, but I think Murray is prepared for a little more ceremonial on the occasion than you suppose. But how's this about the

trousseau, Tim ? I thought you had been making active preparations for many weeks ? ”

I turn scarlet, and shake my head ; and Claire says hurriedly—

“ It’s all right, papa ; she can get everything at a day’s notice. *I’ll* go up to town with her, and we’ll get the trousseau together. Come, Tim dear, run up with me to your room, and we’ll make out the list.”

I am glad to escape ; I am trying to get out of the room, but papa rises, takes hold of me, and kisses me, and as he does so whispers—

“ I thought that money would have burnt holes in your pocket long before this, my child. How is it that you have been so dilatory ? ”

“ I don’t know,” I stammer : “ I always put off *everything* disagreeable if I can, you know.”

“ It’s not too late,” he mutters anxiously. “ My poor child, if it’s repugnant to you, it’s not too late ; tell me ? ”

"Not now," I say, bursting from him and rushing after Claire, who has regarded the whispered colloquy with eager interest.

"What *shall* we do if Theo can't let you have the money, or at least some of it back at once!" she commences as soon as we are safely in my room.

"Be lowered in papa's estimation for ever," I cry despairingly; and Claire retorts, "Now please don't become supine about it, Tim. Sitting down and weepingly contemplating the worst side of the case won't improve matters: something must be done, for papa must never know that Theo had that money from you. I hope Theo will come over to-day; his bright brain will get us out of the scrape."

"It ought to, considering that it got me into it," I say.

"Now don't harp on that 'mouldered string,' and don't look so woe-begone: your expression of face is enough to put any number of suspicions into papa's mind, and any number of questions into his mouth.

Do exert yourself, dear. Suffer anything rather than betray my Theo."

She kneels by my side as she says this, she lays her royal-looking little head on my shoulder, and I promise her that I will do anything rather than betray the trust which her Theo has reposed in me—for his own good!

"There's always the other two hundred to fall back upon," she goes on. "Papa's not likely to ask to look into your dressing-case and purse to see how your finances stand. You're free to spend that, and Theo will soon refund you the rest, and no one will know anything about it."

"Only Mr. Murray asked me to keep two hundred for a rainy day," I say, shivering, as I repeat his phrase.

"That really is expecting too much, even of you," she says kissing me tenderly. "Poor dear Tim! 'rather twenty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay;' rather wet weather all the year round with Theo Bligh than one rainy day with Mr. Murray. What did make you fall in love with him?"

"In 'love' with him!" I echo.

"I won't ask you, though," she goes on hastily. "What lives we used to plan out for ourselves when we were young, Tim! Your love was to be like little Elsie's in *The Romance of the Swan's Nest*: 'I will have a lover, riding on a steed of steeds; and the steed shall be red-roan, and the lover shall be noble;' that was your idea, and Mr. Murray is the reality!"

I wince, and reply—

"And yours was 'the happy prince with joyful eyes, and lighter-footed than the fox.' Theo realizes your ideal well."

"How I wish I could see him ride to-morrow!" she cries, with a sudden thrill of exultation in her lover's glorious appearance. "No one will look like him, no one can! How he'll swing in his saddle——"

"I hope he won't swing out of it," I say prosaically; and then—I can't bear any more just now—I remind Claire that it is the day for refilling the flower-baskets and vases, and that to do it is my office.

For the first time since the receipt of Mr. Murray's letter, I breathe freely when I find myself away in the wilderness, where I have come to gather foliage, and mosses, and ferns for my baskets. Prowling hither and thither among the trees that mercifully intervene between me and the windows of the house, I dare to droop dejectedly, I dare to look as wretched as I feel.

Presently, before I have had energy enough to gather a single leaf, or tear up one bit of emerald moss, a few brilliantly whistled bars of a popular waltz fall upon my ears, and Mr. Theo Bligh comes springing through the wet tangled undergrowth like a young stag.

"What brings you into this morass?" he begins. "Nothing but the fervour of my devotion to your many excellencies would have led me to follow you. I never knew a girl go out of her way to catch a cold and a red nose as you do. Why, I ask, the wilderness when it's wet?"

"Why did you follow me?" I answer. "I didn't want you."

"It's not civil to tell a guest that you don't want him under any circumstances," he says gaily, "especially when he comes to you brimful of plans for your welfare and happiness."

He pauses, and I begin—

"Oh, Theo! have you brought me——"

"An invitation from Lady Torrens for Claire and you to go and stay with her for a few days."

"Have you seen Claire?"

"No, I saw your fluttering garments disappearing in this direction as I rode up, and came after you; I wanted to say something to you alone, in fact," he adds, his manner clouding over a little, and a light scowl marring the brightness of his handsome face.

"What made you tell Lady Torrens about Claire and me?"

"She asked me if I had ever seen you before the other day, and I told her yes, you were engaged to my sister," I reply curtly.

"That's just what I didn't want you to say. A fellow when he's staying in a country



house, where there is a lot of gossip going on, hates to have his engagement blurted out all over the shop. Moreover, Lady Torrens is just like the rest of you, as unreasonable as a woman can be—she chooses to fancy that I'm not 'straightforward,' as she calls it, because I didn't go into her house with a trumpet proclaiming, 'Hear ye, all whom it may concern! I'm engaged to Claire Vincent, a tocherless lass with a lang pedigree.' ”

How heartless he is! how vain he is! how utterly regardless of the feelings of every living creature but himself! I know him to be all these things, and yet—we women are constituted in such a wonderful way—I don't love him one bit less than I did on that summer day when he first flashed across my path.

“Don't begin to scold me,” I say, and I know that my tone is tired, I know that there is a very giving-up air about me altogether. It hardly surprises me when he says—

“What a wet blanket, what a kill-joy you are, Tim, since you have got engaged! Come on; let us gather our mosses and ferns while we may, and then go into Claire and luncheon. I’m like Maud Müller at the present moment—‘a vague unrest, and a nameless longing fills my breast.’ I require food and ‘sustenance,’ by which last I mean a peg.”

“A what?” I ask.

“A brandy and soda; and mind you never let out to Lady Torrens that I’ve taken one at this hour of the day, or she’ll get *me* scratched, as she has failed about the horse.”

“Doesn’t she want you to ride, or doesn’t she want Sir Harold’s horse to run?” I ask.

“She doesn’t want me to ride—she’s taken a feminine fad into her head that I’m too ‘spasmodic,’ as she calls it, to deport myself decently; but if I kill her husband’s horse I’ll show her that I can ride.”

“What’s the worst you have to do?” I ask tremulously.

"The worst is a thundering big fence-and-water jump; and that's a mere nothing to Grey Dolphin, a horse who'd take a church if it came in his way. You'll see the black-and-green come in in a very good place, Tim."

"We shan't be there," I say.

"Oh yes, you will; of course that's what I've come over about. Lady Torrens won't go unless Claire and you go with her. You'll see, in spite of her pronouncing me 'spasmodic,' that I shall be cool enough to bow to you as I pass your carriage."

"Please think of the race and your neck, and don't risk either for the sake of showing off before us," I say hastily.

"Showing off! Is it likely that I, who've ridden dozens of races, should care to 'show off' before a lot of people who won't even know whether I'm going in good form or not?" Theo says, with an air of the most magnificent contempt. "I wouldn't have gone in for this local affair at all—it's altogether out of my line—if Lady Torrens hadn't asked me to do it; but when a

woman asks a fellow to wear her colours, and ride the horse she's backing, and all that kind of business, what's to be done?"

"You told me just now that she didn't want you to ride at all," I remind him.

"Yes; but that's only since she found out that I'm engaged to Claire. There's a good deal of 'high falutin' sensationalism about Lady Torrens; she quite thinks that it's the right kind of thing for her to do, to put the drag on about Claire."

"I am glad she does remember Claire's claims on you," I say reproachfully.

"Who wants to forget Claire's claims? I don't. If I were to forswear every manly sport and pleasure in life, and turn myself into a moody milksop, would Claire, or you for her, be one bit the better satisfied? What did you like me for at first?—tell me that, Tim dear?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I tell him truthfully.

"Of course you don't know, but I can tell you why it was: I was just myself—a fellow

who goes in with ardour for whatever comes in his way. I pledged myself to ride this race, just as I pledged myself to marry Claire—the opportunity of doing it came in my way, and I embraced the opportunity. I don't go out of my way to do things, but if they're well in my path I don't avoid them."

Poor Claire! what a pity that she was so "well in his way!" I have to look away from him resolutely in order to think this. As soon as I steal a glance at the handsome, fearless, open-looking face which surmounts the gallant, well set up, stalwart young frame, I alter my opinion, and instead of pitying Claire, I pity myself.

"Let's get on a little faster," Theo suggests. "Claire will be pleased, won't she, at my answering her letter in person?"

"Claire's always pleased to see you," I say; and I might add, "and so am I—idiotically glad."

"I know she is," he answers egotistically. "Have you managed to get up any of that feeling for Murray yet?"

He bends his head, and looks into my face with laughing eyes. My engagement evidently strikes him as being a great joke—a comical episode in his career which affords him a certain amount of amusement, for which he is rather pleased with me for supplying him than otherwise. What my feelings may be on the subject he never pauses to consider.

“For my own sake, it’s to be hoped that I have got up the feeling,” I say mendaciously; “for I am to be married next week.”

“No!” he cries out in a startled tone; and a tiny sensation of triumph thrills my heart for an instant, while I believe that he is not so utterly indifferent to all that concerns me as he sometimes leads me to think he is. The next instant the triumph fades away as he says—

“What a bore! for I can’t touch a farthing of that money you lent me, and I suppose you’ll be wanting it, won’t you?”

“Of course I shall, Theo.”

“Well, I really don’t see what’s to be done for you. However, it’s no use discussing an unpleasant topic, and howling over the inevitable, is it?” And as he speaks he seems airily to dismiss the subject from his mind, and goes forward with the bound of a deer to jump over a long, high-backed garden seat that is in the middle of the lawn.

Either through the grass being slippery, or his nerves a trifle shaken in spite of himself, he falls as he lands, and when he rises, I see that he grasps his left wrist.


“Are you hurt, Theo?” I cry anxiously.

“My bridle-hand’s strained—what cursed luck!” he mutters.

CHAPTER VII.

"CAN SHE BE CRUEL?"

THEO vacillates a good deal in his treatment of the subject of the strained hand. When it is suggested to him by Claire that he should make it the excuse for doing what we all wish to have to do, namely, resigning his place in the steeple-chase to-morrow, he declares himself to be absolutely unhurt, and indignantly repudiates the idea of proclaiming himself "such a muff to the Torrens' set," as to be turned from his purpose by "a bruise and a girl." Nevertheless, when this effort at interfering with the liberty of the subject in his person has passed from his memory, he makes great capital out of the strain. He tells papa



that he is on the brink of getting a good appointment, but that this accident will militate against his chance of success; and when papa reminds him that he does not write with his left hand, Theo glides gracefully out of the difficulty, as only Theo can, and holds his hand out to Claire to be bathed and bandaged.

I do not for one moment doubt that it is extremely pleasant and amusing for Claire to sit on a low chair by the side of the couch on which Theo reclines, tending that strained wrist of his, and making him feel himself to be essential to her happiness, and to the well-being of the world in general. But it is not pleasant or amusing to me to watch them. If it were only summer weather, I could relieve them of my presence, and try to forget them in the companionship of the dogs out of doors, or of my own thoughts in my own room. But on this dreary, chill February day, I am tempted to stay by the bright, big drawing-room fire; and as I turn my face to the

cheery glow, and my back to the pair of lovers, they presently forget that I am there—and I am too dazed by all that is happening around me to remind them of the fact.

What complications are about me as I sit here in my day-dream! To all outward appearance I am as unharassed a girl as I was that first day, when I scuttled away from danger in the shape of the then unknown Theo Bligh. In reality I am in debt to my father, and to my conscience, the sum of two hundred pounds. But what is that compared to the debt I shall presently owe to Mr. Murray, the man who is going to take me in entire faith, and who will surely find me so terribly wanting?

Suddenly my pity for him changes into pity for myself. I may be very wicked, but I am not wicked enough, surely, to merit such an interminable vista of misery as this which stretches out before me. To go through a long life, perhaps—for I am young and healthy, and full of that vitality which death respects and keeps aloof from

—*bearing* this dread monotony of a loveless, chilled life, from the very prospect of which I shrink appalled.

"I can't endure it! I can't endure it!" I cry aloud, in my agony of impatience; and I break down altogether, bending forward into my own lap, in a state of supine wretchedness which I cannot combat, although I despise myself for yielding to it.

I am raised from the depths by a strong, nervous arm; I am restored to a consciousness of my utter imbecility by the words—

"Tim darling, is it a nightmare? or a pang of conscience on account of some little unconfessed crime, such as murder, or arson, or——?"

"Is it a desire to make a little scene, since no other form of entertainment was at hand?" Claire cuts in coolly; and at her words I remind myself of where I am and what I am doing, and I unwind myself from Theo Bligh's embrace, and lift my hot, tear-stained face from the lappet of his coat.

"I meant that I can't be married," I ex-

claim, looking imploringly from Theo to Claire. "It's too horrible now that it's coming so close. I didn't think it was half so awful when he asked me, but to go away from—from everything I love, and live with him always! Claire, don't let me do it; I'd better die!"

"A deal better," Theo observes philosophically. "As a member of the family I should certainly say 'die,' or you may be tempted to bolt, if there were no other alternative; but there is an alternative—break it off: it's easily done."

"How lightly you speak of breaking an engagement in which honour is involved," Claire puts in.

"She'd far better do it before than after marriage," Theo says quietly, lounging back to the sofa. "However, it's an affair that she only can settle for herself; but I think, Tim, if you give Murray the benefit of that little scene you've just rehearsed, that he'll be ready to declare with Montrose, that 'he'll never love thee more.' By Jove!"

Theo goes on—and I see that the blood rushes to his brow—"I should know intuitively if a girl recoiled from me in that way; but some fellows have hides like a rhinoceros."

I don't love Mr. Murray, but I must be loyal, though it hurts me to open my lips on the subject.

"If he ever saw me look sorry he'd release me on the spot," I explain; "but I've never looked sorry before him. And, Claire—Theo—you will never, either of you, betray what a goose I made of myself just now, will you?"

I go up to my sister and clasp my arms round her neck, and my sister unclaps them, and almost pushes me away.

"You really may trust me, Tim, not to do a single thing that will give you the slightest excuse for being unstable and infirm of purpose. You're so unpractical—you have so little real understanding of what you want yourself—that I believe, if you were to get out of this engagement,

you'd get into another that would be equally uncongenial to you before a week was over your head. For my part, I shall be far more at rest about you when you're safely married and away."

"Oh, Claire, you're joking!" I cry.

"Claire, I think you're giving out your real sentiments with a lucidity that does you credit," Theo says, with a dash of earnestness in his mirthful manner that makes me wonder what it is all about. "I'm sure you'll be far more at rest about Tim when she's safely married and away."

"For her sake only," Claire says quickly.

"Exactly! You're afraid till it's ratified that the Murray bond will break, and that Tim may enter into a fresh alliance with some reckless, good-looking scamp like myself. Well, Claire, what better fate can you wish for your sister than you've chosen voluntarily for yourself? A duplicate of me would suit Tim's taste a good deal better than ever Murray will.—No offence to your

future lord and master, Tim, but, as Swinburne observes of Mary Queen of Scots, 'Do I not know thee to the bone, my sweet?' Don't I know you, Tim?"

He asks it with all the wheedling emphasis of which he is master—and he is master of such a large amount of wheedling emphasis. Still I am silent, for it is a question that my sister's lover ought not to have asked me; and even more than the contemptuous certainty it implies as to the state of my feelings, does it bespeak a sort of regardlessness of Claire's, which makes me fear that he will grow careless as to her suffering on his account—careless enough to allow her to perceive it.

"You think Tim much more shallow than she is, if you believe that you have fathomed her," Claire puts in. "Because she isn't rhapsodical about Mr. Murray, you mustn't fall into the error of thinking that she's not very proud of his having chosen her; it's only that she feels——"

"That there's a nearer one still, and a

dearer one yet than all other,'” Theo interrupts, bringing out his words and his light laugh as carelessly as if he had never probed the weakness of my heart for him, and found out all that was to be known of the root of my disease.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Claire rejoins; “I was only going to tell you that she feels nothing more than the little natural sorrow, the little natural hesitation, which every girl feels when she’s going to leave ‘her own’ for the first time in her life, never again to come back to them as ‘their own’ entirely. Why, I shall feel the same when it comes to the point, and I shall be leaving them for you.”

There is such proud love, there is such open idolatry in these words of hers, that Theo forgets the strain, and rises from his recumbent position, pleased, flattered, and eagerly anxious to continue the subject.

“I believe it is true,” he says, taking her hands in his, and drawing her nearer to him caressingly; “I do believe that you would

throw over your family, and the brightest fate and fortune that could be offered you, for me."

Either she does not heed my presence, or she has forgotten it. With a passionate gesture she frees her hands, and as her arms twine round his neck, and her face buries itself on his shoulder, she says—

"No fate could be bright without you. Theo, don't ask me to go there! Leave that woman's house; I can't be her guest!"

"You must, dear, for to-morrow, if you want to see me ride," he says blithely. "Come, all my attention will be given to Grey Dolphin to-morrow; I shall think more of him than I shall of any woman on the course."

"More than you will of me?" she asks reproachfully.

"Well, to be honest, more than I shall of you," he answers; and even I know that there is something unchivalrous in his brilliant candour.

"By the time I've ridden home and

dressed it will be the Torrens' dinner-time," he goes on. "Now, look here, Claire ; I shall settle it for you. Don't stay there unless you like, but spend to-morrow with Lady Torrens. Her husband will be awfully annoyed if she doesn't go, and she swears—I mean, she says—she won't go without you. Be with her by twelve o'clock : my race comes off at one."

"Do you really wish me to go with her ? Do you really wish me to be there ?" Claire asks.

"It wouldn't do for you not to be there now," he says, with a look of vexation. "There has been talk and a fuss, you see ; and if you're not there, she will think there is something wrong with us ; and if she once thinks that, I should get the cold shoulder from her. You women are kittle cattle to deal with."

"Then, to please you, I will go, Theo ; but, what with my anxiety about you and my dislike to Lady Torrens, I shall not have a very happy day," Claire says wistfully.

"I tell you that Grey Dolphin and I are like one. By Jove! we must be the two parts they talk about in the Symposium, which must come together to form a perfect whole," he laughs gaily, by way of reply to her first objection. But I observe that he ignores the subject of her dislike to Lady Torrens. Indeed, the statement as to the feeling existing does not seem to make the slightest impression upon him. The fact is that Theo has gained his point about Claire's being present to see him ride. Having gained his point, he light-heartedly casts behind him all consideration for the pain that point may inflict upon any one else. I see all this; I understand it perfectly. Nevertheless, he is selfish in such a gay, bright, easy way, that there is the most subtle fascination in his selfishness. Claire can't be angry with him; and as for me—I find it impossible to like him one bit less than I did when I first began to love him, and was blind to all his faults.


"Mind you look your best to-morrow,"

he says to Claire in parting. "It will be known all over the place that you're engaged to me, and I want other fellows to see that I had some excuse for the weakness of which I've been guilty."

"The folly is not irreparable," Claire says. But even as she says it she clings more closely to him, and smiles more winningly on him; and I understand clearly that, with her own good-will, she will never relinquish the hold she has on him, however weak that hold may grow. I would relinquish him—if he were mine to relinquish—at any given moment, if he seemed to wish it. But Claire will cling to him. Whose love is the truest, I wonder, Claire's or mine?

Having finally taken his leave of Claire, he gives me a farewell greeting in parting.

"Good-bye, Tim. I shall be awfully sorry when you go; especially as you'll go as Mrs. Murray, and I shall not be allowed to write to you as I please. Think better of it while there's time—there's a dear girl."



"Think better of it!" I hardly dare to think of it at all.

As soon as he is gone, and Claire is no longer under the invigorating influence of his presence, her spirits sink rapidly, and she develops a sort of peevish, nervous excitability which is quite a new feature in her disposition.

"How foolish we were to let him persuade us to go to-morrow—especially to go with Lady Torrens! We ought to be up in town buying your things, Tim. The end of it will be that you won't be half ready to be married when Mr. Murray comes, and your dilatoriness will give him a very just cause of offence against you at starting."

"I don't care," I say desperately; "he has so many just causes of offence against me that one or two more will signify very little. Claire, what can I do—what shall I do?"

"Marry him, of course; unless you want to marry some one else and create a scandal," Claire replies coldly; and the

conviction shoots home to my heart that Claire is anxious to get rid of me—that she does distrust me with regard to Theo.

And all the while I know that I would die rather than wrong her or win him. However, these are noble sentiments which it would be absurd to endeavour to substantiate now. Accordingly, as I am called upon to say something, I tackle the far less difficult question of my clothes.

“I’ve made up my mind not to be married in white,” I say, with abrupt decision.

“Nonsense!” Claire rejoins. “Why should you want to make yourself conspicuous by being married in something that’s out of the way? It will look exactly as if you wanted to call attention to what you are doing, and why you’re doing it, if you startle people into questioning the reason why you’re dressed in some unexpected colour. You’ll just wear white, Tim, dear, and the description of your dress in the *County Press* shall read just like that of

any other person. I should say”—and now Claire looks at me critically—“that you can stand satin even—and satin is awfully trying; but I do think you can stand it; and it will be such a grand dress for you by and by, when you’re illustrating our national hospitality in a foreign land.”

I look at my dear Claire, and for the first time in my life I ask myself, “Can she be cruel?” And I will not hear the answer that my despairing question has demanded.

CHAPTER VIII.

“THE FAVOURITE AGAINST THE FIELD !”

WHAT a day it is ! What a sweet, fresh spring day this is on which we drive with Lady Torrens, between hedges that are bursting into every shade of green, to the trysting-place of the sporting population of the county. This trysting-place is a pretty, bijou Swiss cottage belonging to Sir Harold Torrens—a lovely toy place some miles from town, village, post-office, butcher, baker, and every other convenience that is essential to the well-being of humanity. In consequence of this it is untenanted ; but it is beautifully kept up, and is as habitable and home-like on a

sudden emergency—such as the present—as if it were always occupied.

It is set like a gem in the middle of a velvet lawn. Its walls are covered with lattice-work, and are brilliant on this sunny spring day with scarlet japonica, monthly roses, yellow jasmine, and glitteringly green ivy, which is fast spreading over its thatched roof and eaves. Inside the rooms are draped and furnished with flowered chintzes—even the looking-glasses are framed in chintz—and large baskets of trailing plants are pendant, in place of chandeliers, from the centre of every ceiling. Refreshments are served in a dining-room which is fitted up with a lightness, brightness, and grace, that makes it seem like a banqueting hall for Queen Titania and her darling elves. Even Claire, who has been sad and silent during the drive, is charmed into animation by the beauty and fitness of the adornments and arrangements; and there is almost cordiality in the tone in which she congratulates Lady Torrens on her taste, when we learn that

the Swiss cottage and all about it, within and without, has been designed and carried out by her, "unaided by landscape-gardener, upholsterer, or artist," as she tells us herself.

"People speak disparagingly of love in a cottage," Claire says, "but in such a cottage as this it must be a poem. Isn't it so, Lady Torrens?"

"I've never tried it," Lady Torrens says; and then she blushes, for she has previously mentioned to us that she and Sir Harold spend a good many weeks here every summer.

Glancing from her to Claire, I see that a corresponding blush has mounted to my sister's cheek, but hers is a blush that seems full of happy thoughts. Probably she is picturing to herself what life would be like here with Theo. At any rate, I do this for an unguarded minute or two, and the picture that I paint is that of an Elysium on earth.

The cottage stands on the highest part

of the grounds, and out under the verandah we get a capital view of the whole course. It commences on the border of the lawn, bears away to the left over rather a stiff hedge, then along on the flat for a field or two, then over a hurdle and ditch, then along by the side of a hill, which is the turning-point, then over a stone wall—a bad jump by itself, but not so dangerous if it had to be taken alone; but parallel with the wall, deceitfully close to it, an ugly grip yawns.

“It’s the only confusing bit in the whole course,” Lady Torrens says, pointing it out to us and some other of her lady guests, as we stand outside the cottage windows. “When once I see them well over that, my heart will be lighter.”

As she speaks, Theo, with a loose coat over his jockey costume, runs up to us, and answers her last words as he shakes hands with Claire and me.

“We have to go round twice, remember; don’t let your heart get light too soon. That

brown beggar that Sir Harold is riding changes from a lamb to a lion almost as suddenly as that sweet Kismet of yours, Tim."

"I'm not afraid for Sir Harold—I mean I have such absolute confidence in Sir Harold's skill," Lady Torrens says. Then she adds—and an uneasy expression creeps over her face as she speaks—"And you will be very careful, I'm sure, for Miss Vincent's sake. You must promise us that you will rival Sir Harold in caution?"

She speaks very earnestly, and her lips quiver for an instant, and Theo grows radiant with pleasure at this proof of the interest she takes in him. His handsome face flashes; his tell-tale eyes sparkle with gratified vanity. He forgets Claire's presence among other things, and bends his haughty, beautiful boy's head down towards Lady Torrens.

"I'll promise to do my best," he says; "for when it was first started it was understood we were to ride for your favour, and

that you were to give the prize. You’ve backed out of the last part of the arrangement; but I choose to consider that we’re riding for your favour still.”

She draws her lithe figure up in a stately way at once.

“My favour will never be given to any one who does anything against my will and judgment,” she says coldly. “This race is entirely against my will and judgment, and no one knows this better than you do, Mr. Bligh.”

He merely laughs in reply, gives her a thrilling glance through his eyelashes, and turns to Claire.

“Look sharp at that corner when we’re passing,” he says, pointing out the angle of the lawn; “that’s where I am going to raise my cap to you—that’s where Grey Dolphin will have me at a disadvantage if he chooses to take it.”

He steals a look at Lady Torrens as he speaks, but Lady Torrens—though she is conscious of the look, I am sure—will not respond to it.

“Theo,” Claire cries, in a sudden access of fear for him, “don’t do anything rash—don’t risk anything.—Lady Torrens!”—she turns appealingly to our hostess, forgetting everything, forgiving everything, throwing aside all her vain imaginings and foolish jealousies in her genuine fear for Theo—“Lady Torrens, do use your influence; do insist upon his riding without any show-off or folly at all!—I shan’t be able to watch you, Theo, unless you’ll promise me that you’ll not play tricks.”

He begins to move away, and she follows him, urging her request most winningly, most passionately; seeking to make him regard her wishes with a winsome grace that I think only Claire possesses. As she does so, Lady Torrens says to me—

“How much too well she loves that careless, thoughtless, fickle boy! No, I won’t say that she loves him too well; for if anything can exorcise that demon of selfishness which possesses him, it will be the love of such a pure, good girl as your

sister Claire; but she is allowing herself to become subservient to him; his caprices affect her, and it is not for her happiness that she should let him see this. If he had a nobler nature——” She pauses, and I say, rather crossly—

“You’re beginning to find him full of faults, Lady Torrens. You liked him well enough the other day to claim him as your intimate friend, and to feel hurt because he had not told you of his engagement, and now——”

“I know him better, though I do not like him less,” she interrupts. “My child, we’re all alike in this: we see his faults clearly when we don’t see his face; when we look in that, we forget them all.”

Claire comes back to us now with cloudless eyes and a mouth that is curved with a happy smile.

“He made me give him a rose,” she says to me; “and he promises that he will ride steadily, and not go looking about him and lifting his cap, or any nonsense of that

kind. And as for riding for her favour, Tim," she adds in a whisper, "he says he only told her he would do that to flatter her and keep her in a good humour. He says she's a most exacting woman, and will have no medium manner from any man. If he's not the slave of her whims, she won't even treat him with conventional attention. I consider that a detestable nature—don't you?"

"Yes—but it's not hers," I say bluntly. "If she has ever seemed to demand flattery and devotion from Theo, it must be because, to serve his own ends, he has given her both freely at some time or other. It's mean of him to run her down to you, Claire," I continue indignantly. "It's cowardly to cast all the blame on the woman, even if there has been any foolish half-flirtation going on; it's not like a gentleman! How can he do it?"

Claire shrugs her shoulders. "When your flow of intemperate language has ceased, I have a remark to make," she says.

"I've said all I'm going to say," I reply, cooling.

"Doesn't it occur to you that if there has been any 'foolish half-flirtation' between them, that it must have been entirely her fault?" she asks contemptuously. "She! Lady Torrens, a married woman of position, and he a young, warm-hearted, warmer-headed, impressionable man—it must have been her fault!"

"Perhaps so," I say resignedly. "Anyway, I would rather be the one in fault than the one so frightfully false as he must be to talk about it and against her."

Our conversation ends here, for they are weighted and mounted by this time, and are falling into position at the edge of the lawn.

In another minute they are off! For a few seconds dead silence reigns among all of us who are out under the verandah, but presently chatter resumes her dominion over the majority, and only Claire, Lady Torrens, and myself are silent. Lady Tor-

rens is bringing a powerful pair of glasses to bear upon the forms that are flying round the course. Claire's sweet eyes see them vividly enough without any artificial aid; and as for me—I believe I should know what was happening if I were blind.

From the sporting crowd assembled at a short distance from the cottage, shouts are wafted to us every instant, and we learn that Grey Dolphin is the favourite, and that he is being heavily backed. "The favourite against the field, bar none," is the verdict given at the end of the first round; and Theo puts on a spurt at once, and skims ahead of the rest without an effort, apparently. For the first time Lady Torrens speaks.

"He is riding it splendidly," she says—somehow or other, it never occurs to one of us to question whom she means by "he:" we all understand her perfectly well—"not one of them will creep up to him. Grey Dolphin's the winner."

As she says it, we see Theo lifting the

good horse at the big jump. He rises to it in a way that suggests invisible wings, then the others come popping up and over, and—one is knocked out of the race when they go skimming along over the flats. The favourite has dropped into the grip, and has not come out again!

In a moment the spot is surrounded, and Grey Dolphin bounds out of his temporary difficulty and gallops riderless over the field; and Claire and I make a dash down the lawn, and arrive at the fringe of the crowd, breathless, shaking, heart-sick with dire apprehension. Even in this supreme moment I envy Claire, in spite of this agony of suspense which is her portion! She may show her anguish; I must conceal mine.

He is lifted out of the fatal ditch and laid on the grass till a stretcher can be fetched, and Claire kneels by his side, and looks into his insensible face with all the love she feels. I stand by passively till Lady Torrens comes down to us, and sends me back to the cottage with orders as to bed and bandages,

and a doctor. Presently he is brought in, and we learn that his arm is broken, and that there is concussion of the brain.

“Hadn’t he better be taken to our house at once?” Claire prompts me to say, and the doctor’s answer strikes dismay into our hearts.

“He mustn’t be moved from here for some time—for some weeks,” he says. “I can’t tell yet how much mischief is done; but if he’s to pull through it he must be left here quietly.—Are you staying here now, Lady Torrens?”

“We only stay here in the summer,” she says.

“That’s unfortunate. Well, I must send him in the best nurse I can get; but I’m sorry you can’t be here to look after him; he’ll want more care than a rough country nurse will give him.”

I go and give this intelligence to Claire, and, for the first time since Grey Dolphin failed his rider, her face is recognizable as the face of Claire.

“Aunt Helen will come and nurse him, of course, and I shall come with her. I should have been more than disgusted if Lady Torrens had assumed the post. I’ll send for Aunt Helen at once. I’ll write, and I shall wait here till she comes.”

“If I’m ever ill I hope Aunt Helen won’t nurse me,” I say petulantly, for the outsider sensations are strongly upon me. Claire will know a little, at least, of what love in a cottage is like, if she stays here to help Aunt Helen to nurse Theo. I shall remain in the most dire ignorance concerning it. (How I would tend him, though, if I had the opportunity!) Is it any wonder that I feel inclined to unjustly deride love in a cottage? Is it any wonder that I think that Claire “really ought to go home”?

As I realize that I do really think this, I almost recoil from myself. Am I growing so mean in my misery that I would debar my sister from the enjoyment of any legitimate bit of happiness—and surely this, of nursing the man she is to marry, is a legi-

timate bit? I strive to be magnanimous; I struggle to put my own foolish pain aside, and I succeed to the extent of being able to say—

“Your place is here, Claire, undoubtedly. Shall I come over to-morrow with the things you’ll want?”

“Well, no; I think you’d better be getting on with your own trousseau,” Claire says dubiously. “You see, any one can bring my things, but no one but yourself can select yours, as I shall be absent; but write to me, and—don’t let there be any hitch about the marriage, dear: we Vincents will be getting ourselves terribly talked about, if we don’t take care.”

“Claire,” I mutter mournfully, “what is this that has come between us?”

“Nothing—it’s a mere idle fancy on your part that anything has come between us,” she says, and she tries to smile; but I see that it costs her an effort to do this, and so her words carry no conviction to my sore, suspicious heart. I am turning away

discomfited and depressed, when she adds abruptly—“There is something between us, Tim, my darling. It is my hateful fear that Theo likes you so much that he’s on the brink perpetually of loving you better than he does me. Oh, Tim, I am ashamed of the feeling, but it’s a real one!”

It is a real one, and a cruel one too—cruel to me, who am undeserving of the implied distrust! cruel to poor Claire, whom in its blind savagery it tears, and rends, and weakens. It is a devil, and must be cast out.

“There shall be no hitch of my making about my marriage,” I begin, with trembling lips; “but as for Theo’s liking me, Claire, his liking has never shown itself to me.” (May I be forgiven this lie, which I am telling to make her feel happier!) “He has played with me to amuse himself, as he would play with a kitten.”

“The play has been too strong for the poor kitten,” Claire says, knitting her brows a little in inquiry, not in anger. “Go now,

dear; get Aunt Helen over as soon as possible, for until she comes Lady Torrens will stay."

I take a down-hearted leave of Lady Torrens, and am driven home; and I go at once to Aunt Helen's room with my evil tidings, and the request for her immediate attendance at the Swiss cottage. Mabel meets me at the door with a tumbler and a fork in her hand, and before I can give my news, she drowns my voice by proceeding to whisk up the yolk of an egg with amiable but noisy zeal.

"Aunt Helen's bronchitis has seized her so badly," she tells me in a distinct whisper, "Magdalen and I are quite nervous about her. Doctor says she's of such a full habit that he's afraid it will go hardly with her. We haven't been able to get her to swallow anything to-day."

I pass my sister and creep up to the bedside. Even my inexperienced eyes tell me that Aunt Helen is very ill indeed. She breathes with difficulty, her face is un-

naturally flushed, and pain is lord paramount evidently in her heavy head and blood-shot eyes. I hate myself for being a messenger of woe; and when I have told her about Theo, and she moans out an entreaty to be let go to him, and tries to lift her agony-bound head from the pillow, and fails to do so with an even more piteous moan than the first—when I have seen and heard these things, my heart softens towards Aunt Helen inexplicably.

“Don’t fret,” I say soothingly; “he will be well looked after, though you can’t go to him. Lady Torrens will stay, I’m sure, as you’re too ill to go yet, and Claire can remain with her.”

Her eyes flash excitedly, even through the film of suffering by which they had been overspread a moment before. She makes me jump up from my sympathetic, stooping attitude, by exclaiming—

“Claire must come home at once. I can quite trust him to the care of Lady Torrens; and I should not be doing my duty to one

of your father's daughters if I allowed her to remain in a position which could be questioned. Claire must come home at once : it is my duty to insist upon it," she winds up in a hoarse, painful whisper.

The sense of duty, and the determination to do it, invariably renders Aunt Helen more detestable in my eyes than she is when she pounds along her path with an air of stolid disregard to every consideration that does not concern her own immediate comfort and well-being. When this latter course is hers, I am justified to myself in letting my well-established dislike to her reign absolutely over me. But when, in grand duty's name, she thwarts, vexes, hurts, and injures us, I fail to plead my own cause satisfactorily even to myself.

"It will be cruel to bring Claire away from Theo now," I plead. "You are fond of her, you know, Aunt Helen ; and you do love Theo : let her stay."

Aunt Helen moans and turns her head wearily on the pillow.

“I’m too fond of them both to let her stay,” she murmurs. “Don’t oppose me, Tim; she must—she shall come home! If I, his aunt—the one who loves him best in the world—am satisfied to leave him solely in the care of Lady Torrens (if she’ll accept the trust), rather than that one of you ungrateful, wilful girls should be compromised, it will be strange indeed if you offer any opposition.”

“You’re hurting Aunt Helen by making her talk,” Mabel says, pushing me aside. “Now, not a word more; you are so awkward in a sick-room, Tim. It’s to be hoped Mr. Murray will always enjoy rude health, or he’ll discover that the art of listening well isn’t the highest a wife should possess. Please go!”

I go, with this thought crushing all power of speech out of me. For some reason or other, Aunt Helen wishes to separate Claire from Theo, and her wish to do so is not based on any honest desire for Claire’s real happiness and welfare. What noxious weeds

of suspicion will spring up and poison poor Claire's already sick mind if she is compelled to come away from Theo now! The craving that possesses me to set everybody at ease and everything straight makes me injudicious as usual, and I exclaim aloud, as Mabel hustles me out of the room—

“I'll go and speak to papa: he shall decide about Claire.”

CHAPTER IX.

SYDNEY IS STRONG.

I go to papa's study in a white heat. The fervour of my spirit of partizanship for Claire is kept alive by the irrepressible dread I have, that I may not do all I can to secure for Claire this privilege of helping to nurse Theo, which is her right. I enter the room with a rush, and, as the window is open, the draught I make flutters a lot of loose sheets off the table, and disperses them—written side downwards on the floor—in a way that is very maddening to the one who has just inscribed them, and who has doubts as to their being dry. Without looking round, papa says impatiently—

“ I wish you could come into the room as

the others do. What have you come to bother me about now? ”

Never in my life have I been spoken to in this way by papa before. I spring to his side, and put my arms round his neck. I must keep papa at any cost of current displeasure from him.

“Forgive me, I’m so unhappy,” I begin ; and he throws down his pen, and takes my face between his hands, and exclaims—

“My little Tim here ! I thought it was Mabel or Magdalen. They’ve worried me awfully to-day, by insisting upon reporting the progress your poor Aunt Helen’s illness is making every ten minutes, and declaring that they feel sure she ‘has something on her mind.’ When the twins begin to dabble with mysteries and melodrama, the family peace is likely to be wrecked, for they do it clumsily, don’t they, Tim ?—as clumsily as you opened the door just now.”

Papa puts me away from him affectionately but firmly ; he wants to write, and I am very much in his way. I have never

had either the temerity or the inclination before this hour to intervene between him and the pursuit that I love and honour, but now I am both brave and irrepressible.

"Papa," I begin, taking the pen from his hand, "the young people of your real life claim precedence over those of fiction. Theo has met with a bad accident; Claire wants to stay and nurse him, and Aunt Helen says Claire shan't do it. Claire's your own child, papa: contradict Aunt Helen, for Claire's sake, for once."

"What's happened to young Bligh?" he asks anxiously.

"His horse fell at a stiff stone wall, and landed him in a ditch."

"It's not a hunting day?"

"No, papa—he was racing," I explain hesitatingly.

"Steeple-chasing, in fact, when he's hardly safe in his saddle on the flat," papa says sternly; and there is no anxiety, but a great deal of anger in his tone now.

"Where is he? and how is he hurt?"

“His arm is broken, and the doctor says ‘there’s something like concussion of the brain,’” I reply as firmly as I can.

“There’s nothing ‘like concussion of the brain’ but concussion of the brain itself: why couldn’t the ass say what he meant?” papa says contemptuously. “Where did it happen? Where have they taken the boy?”

“To Sir Harold’s Swiss cottage. Claire is staying there with Lady Torrens,” I say with a whimper, for the strain upon me has been a long-continued and a heavy one.

“She must come home, Tim,” he says quietly. “Lady Torrens is not like an old friend, or even an intimate acquaintance. Claire mustn’t stay in a stranger’s house to nurse a lover, who in all probability will never be her husband.”

He puts his pen down as he says this, rests his elbow on the table, and his chin on his hand, and gazes gravely and silently at nothing particular; and I gaze at him, and discern that it will be useless to make any appeal against this decision of his.

"You're quite right, my child," he says presently; "the young people of my real life ought to claim precedence with me over those of fiction. I'm afraid, though, that I haven't yielded them this precedence often enough, or Claire and you would be differently circumstanced now."

"Don't mind me," I plead; "I've never expected much happiness from—I mean, I never thought about marrying at all, so I can't be disappointed, however it turns out. But Claire loves Theo as well as he does her, and everything that keeps her away from him, and everything that happens to make her uncertain or anxious about him, really hurts her."

"That's not an uncommon condition with girls who are in love," papa says, half laughing. "Well, it's gone too far for me to forbid her nursing her love-sick fancies, but I do most decidedly forbid her to stay there and nurse him. My opinion of him is that he will throw Claire over for the first woman with money who is weak

enough to listen to him ; and I only hope that my opinion is well founded."

"It will kill her !" I say passionately.

"Not at all," papa replies coolly ; "it will be very unpleasant to her for a time, but it won't be half as unpleasant a position as that of his wife would be in a year or two on a tightened income. Does Claire—or do you think that Theo Bligh would consider any woman's happiness or peace of mind for a moment unless that woman ministered to his comfort, his love of luxury, and his habits of idleness? If Claire could put money in his purse, he would remember that he is in honour bound to her. As she can do nothing of the sort, he'll accept her devotion until he meets some woman with a soft heart and head, who is willing to pay a high price for the pleasure of being his neglected wife."

I think very highly of papa ; I do most firmly believe in his love and care for us, but I do question now why, if he thought all this, he should have allowed Claire to

taste the happiness of being engaged to Theo at all. My feelings are expressed in my face, I suppose, for he says presently—

“You wonder I didn’t forbid the engagement at first, I see. If I had done so, Claire would have gone through life regarding me as her natural enemy, and Theo as superior to the very best fellow she could ever possibly marry. You’ve been allowed to reason about things for yourselves ever since your reasonable faculties developed, yet such is the perverted nature of women that a hare-brained boy turned Claire’s head at once, and Murray’s talents made an idiot of you. And now,” he adds, rising up, “I will go and bring Claire home myself; and when she comes, Tim, don’t you sympathetically urge her on to feel more aggrieved than she’ll be naturally inclined to feel. This is a question of decorum, and I am bound to deal with it to the best of my judgment.”

He prepares to start, and I stand by in silence, smarting under a sense of defeat.

He is our father, and I am as sure as I am that I exist at the present moment that there is no alloy of selfishness, no desire to tantalize us, no wish to sport with our feelings, in any determination he comes to concerning us. At the same time I feel intensely for the agony that will be Claire's portion, when she knows that it is decreed that not only is she to be separated from Theo for a time at this crisis, but that he is to be left in charge of Lady Torrens. And I have it in my heart to pray to papa to be more sympathetic and less paternal for once.

But I dare not word my prayer, for I feel too fearful of his doubts of Theo being well grounded to dare to oppose them. I know that Claire will think that I have not exerted myself to the uttermost in her behalf. I know that the twins and Aunt Helen will chant hymns of praise and thanksgiving for my defeat. I know that Theo, when he recovers—if he recovers, Heaven help him!—will think that my weakness for him

made me a weak advocate for Claire. I know all these things, for sorrow has taught me well. Above all, I know that we two poor girls are altogether hopelessly wrong.

It seems such a long, long time before papa comes back with Claire and news of Theo, for I spend the whole of it in loitering about vaguely, and in evading the twins, who are continually making missions of mercy into unexpected places, in order to procure for Aunt Helen something which the commonest understanding ought to teach them Aunt Helen cannot possibly want. They pervade the whole house, in spite of their voluble declarations to every one who will listen to them that they can't be a minute out of Aunt Helen's room—"she requires such constant attention, poor dear!" Our old housekeeper, Mrs. Martin, comes to speak to me, and to extract information from me "about Mr. Theo." (Theo is a most popular person in the household: he fees and smiles upon all who can serve him, and do serve

him, with equal liberality.) And when I have told her all I can recall of the episode that made my brain reel, she informs me that the twins "are born nurses"—born "blessings," she calls them. "They've been in and out of that room ever since Mrs. Bligh was taken without stopping, as one might say, and without a thought of saving their poor dear legs." I strive to sympathize with the strain on their poor dear legs; I struggle to respect my sisters for their feats of pedestrianism and self-sacrifice; but I cannot feel cordially disposed to greet them kindly when they perpetually interrupt me. The truth is, I am nervous, shattered, heartsick, uncertain of myself and everybody else, and I have no one to turn to for counsel and support.

Just as my solitude and the interruptions to it have grown altogether unbearable, Sydney Dale comes in, and I tell him all that has happened, and a little of what I fear will happen.

"Claire will break her heart at being

brought away from him; and who knows what misery may come of bringing her away? Theo may think she was careless about him, and if he thinks that——”

“If he thinks that, he must be a more conceited fellow even than I think he is,” Sydney interrupts. “He wouldn’t have Claire set her father’s judgment and wishes at defiance in such a matter.”

“He’s very fond of her, you know,” I say, with a qualm, “and so he’s tenacious.”

“He’s very fond of himself, and so he’s awfully exacting,” Sydney rejoins. “I’m of your father’s opinion: I don’t think that it will ever be a marriage; and if, by any unlucky chance, it comes to one, it won’t be a happy marriage.”

“There’s a risk, of course; there is in everything,” I say wearily. “He mayn’t be a model of fidelity—what man is?”

“I know one man, at least, who, having shot his arrow and missed his mark, will never aim at another target,” he says gravely; and I am too conscious of his

meaning to say anything depreciatory of such a course of constancy in reply.

"I don't understand a fellow giving the reins to his fancy in that way, and trying to pluck every flower he thinks fair, and getting tired of them one after another. You're not fickle either, Tim," he adds, looking me straight in the face. "And, though your loyalty is misplaced, I love you for it."

"Your loyalty is misplaced too," I say, with a burning blush. "All loyalty is misplaced, I'm beginning to think, in such cases. Be a dear, sensible fellow, Syd. Send me away from home with this bit of happiness, at least, in my heart—that I may hope to hear of you soon with some pretty, dear girl as your wife, who'll make Dalesmeet a paradise to you, instead of the purgatory it will be when Mrs. Trirney goes."

He laughs—but it is not a hearty laugh, by any means—and tells me I must always think of Dalesmeet while he lives as the

house of a bachelor brother who will always gladly welcome me and mine, and of Kismet as the petted tyrant of the Dalesmeet stables. "I've got quite fond of the mare. She's as gentle as you are yourself at times; but occasionally she loses her temper and would hurt me if she could, which you never could do, and never have done—intentionally."

"It's a dreadful world," I say despairingly; and he rouses himself at this into the semblance of cheerfulness and satisfaction with things as they are, and as they are going to be, and tries to make me understand that all the painful part of that Brighton episode is blotted out of his memory. Two or three times I am on the brink of telling him the dilemma I am in about the money, and two or three times I check myself successfully. At last I feel that I must make him comprehend that Theo had not been merely making a vain-glorious display of his horsemanship when he met with his accident (as Syd is

evidently only too well inclined to think). So I make the disclosure to Syd as creditably as I can, that Theo has a debt of honour, to pay which he risked his life.

If he strove to get the real truth from me gradually, bit by bit, Sydney would never do it. But he is so absolutely impolitic and truthful that I am at a disadvantage immediately.

"What do you know of his debts of honour, Tim?" he asks. "Are they so heavy that he has been compelled to burden Claire and you with the knowledge of them?"

"I only know about one," I stammer, "and that he can't prevent my knowing—and it would be mean of me to split about it, Sydney. You know I never did split about anything, did I, Syd? Don't you tempt me to do it now."

"I wouldn't tempt you to do anything that is wrong for the world, my darling," he mutters; "but—you want help, Tim, and, till I know your trouble, I can't give you that help. No other man has a better right to

offer it than I have, Tim; I have known you such a long time, dear, and I know you so well."


I am touched by his appeal, but not sufficiently touched by it to relapse into the "confiding fool" mood. If he made half such a point of his love for me as he does of his knowledge of me, I should surrender without discretion, and tell him the tale of my weakness and my woe. But he keeps his head in a way that compels me to keep mine. I do not dread verbal reproof or lecture from my dear brother-lover, but I do dread the outburst of honest indignation which will sparkle from his eyes, and flash from his true face, when he learns that I have been false to my nature and my father at the bidding of Theo Bligh.

"You are so good," I murmur, and he shrugs his shoulders at the epithet—the best man in the world would revolt at being called "good" when he is only loving—but I disregard this fact, and proceed to expound my unformed views to him. "You are so

CHAPTER X.

SYDNEY IS WEAK.

DAYS pass without any outer change in the round of our daily life at Ravensbourne. Some official circumlocution keeps Mr. Murray "hanging on," as he calls it, in town, and again our marriage is indefinitely postponed. Our marriage! I often catch myself looking at my reflection in the glass and wondering why I haven't altered more than I have, under the influence of the idea of it. I do look such a mere girl still to be the wife of such a man as Mr. Murray. When my hair breaks loose, and hangs about me in copper-coloured festoons, I am, as Theo Bligh says, "much more like an unbroken chestnut colt than a consul's



wife." Perhaps it is the consideration that I shall have a little more time to study, and master a few more matronly graces, which causes me to heave a sigh of relief when I hear that "our marriage" is deferred indefinitely. Perhaps it is for this reason, but I more than suspect myself of rejoicing chiefly because I am left within reach of daily tidings of Theo Bligh.

He stays on at the Swiss cottage, under the care of Sir Harold and Lady Torrens, and for a while his progress is very slow. What torments of concealed agony and anxiety I go through during these days! Claire is justified in looking pale and harassed—her lover is at death's door, and she is not with him. But I am only expected to exhibit a tender, outspoken, sisterly sympathy; and as I can't exhibit this without betraying my real feelings, I stultify myself altogether, and am accused by the twins of being so selfishly absorbed in my own affairs that I take no interest in "poor dear Theo."

Claire is not with him. Even now, when he is in actual danger, when Aunt Helen, in her newborn helplessness, lies weeping hopelessly about him all day long, when papa removes his veto and offers to take Claire over to Lady Torrens, Claire is not with him. "He is well taken care of, I'm sure of that," she says, in reply to papa's offer, "and too many authorities in a sick room are apt to complicate matters: while Lady Torrens watches over him he does not need me—I doubt if he misses me."

It is in vain that I remonstrate with her, in vain that I plead as passionately for her to consider her own happiness and his as if I were pleading for myself. It is in vain that I beseech her to put Lady Torrens out of the question altogether. Claire is firm—obstinate in her resolve not to go near Theo while Lady Torrens remains at the Swiss cottage. "It may be natural that she, as his hostess, should stay to take care of a guest who has been half killed by her husband's horrible horse, and who is lying ill in her

house, but it's not nice," Claire says; and I can only answer her that "*it is natural.*"

At length there comes a letter from Lady Torrens to Claire that ought to charm her over to Theo's side at once. "Mr. Bligh has recovered consciousness for the first time this morning—ten minutes ago only. His first words were—'Where's Claire?' Come to him without delay, for he is impatient to see you, and any outbreak of impatience may retard his recovery," Lady Torrens writes. And Claire throws the letter down, and repeats her resolve not to go to the Swiss cottage while Lady Torrens stays.

"What will papa think—what will Theo think—what will Lady Torrens think herself!" I urge.

"I am perfectly indifferent as to what they think," Claire retorts. "I dislike her so that any show of kindness from her would be odious to me, and any show of gratitude from him to her would madden me. Aunt Helen ought to exert herself, and go and take

Lady Torrens' place. My belief is that Aunt Helen is as well as I am now, but that she has a motive in almost thrusting Theo upon Lady Torrens' care and kindness. She has a motive, and I am to be sacrificed to it."

"If he were my Theo, no one but himself would separate me from him," I say.

"And Lady Torrens would very soon teach him how to do it," Claire cries out. "You would act very differently to me, I know that; you'd make friends with Lady Torrens and rely on her honour, and one fine day you would find that you had relied on a broken reed. At least, I'll not gather up the dust and hand to her which she is trying to throw in my eyes. Nor will I wear the willow for Theo. There are other men in the world who would give their lives to gain the love that Theo doesn't take too much trouble to keep."

This is the first intimation I have that Claire is capable of carrying her resentment to what I regard as the extreme length of even contemplating the possibility of tole-

rating any other man's love. I am shocked and surprised at the revelation, but I am more shocked and surprised when, presently, I see that she is drawing on Sydney Dale to be one of the men who would give their lives for that love of hers which Theo Bligh has kept such a slack grasp of recently.

Claire has a genius for winning, and I fear that Sydney, in his unsuspicion, will be readily won. It has been a matter of wonderment to me, ever since Sydney let slip that half confession of his liking for me at Brighton, that he should have broken down the fraternal barrier which custom had erected for my sake instead of for Claire's. But now that Claire is engaged with his knowledge, and while the man to whom she is engaged is *hors de combat*, it is more than a matter of wonderment to me that he should be so un-Sydney-like as to allow her to lure him on to even seem to forget Theo and Theo's claims on her for a moment.

I must confess that though she is not justified in her efforts to beguile the time

while Theo is absent and ill, in the way she is doing, that she is justified in her doubt as to the genuineness of Aunt Helen's suffering, and the integrity of Aunt Helen's conduct. Aunt Helen is keenly anxious about something, but she is no longer ill. She makes a great parade of getting up from her sick bed one morning, and being driven over to the Swiss cottage swathed in furs to see Theo ; but the sharpened visions of Claire and myself see that no suffering is involved in the matter, and that it has cost her neither pain nor fatigue to make the effort. For some reason or other, Aunt Helen is practising a deception upon us. For some reason or other, though her affection for him prompts her to go to Theo, some other feeling in connection with him induces her to feign and plead physical inability to relieve Lady Torrens of the charge which has been laid upon her.

These are doleful days for me. My future is hazy ; my intercourse with Claire is embittered by the sarcastic tone in which she

speaks of Theo, though I know at the same time that she longs to be with him, longs to show him some of the love she feels, and make him respond to it ; and, lastly, Sydney Dale is becoming estranged from and altered towards me. When we three—Claire, Syd, and I—ride out together now, it is by her side he keeps the whole time. Or if he does leave it for a minute, a pretty, half-impe-rious, half-coquettish gesture and smile from her takes him to his station, flushed, happy, and yet half ashamed of himself. My pulses have never been quickened by the slightest pang of love for him, but I did respect him so thoroughly ; and now he is showing himself to be even as other men are—weak, vain, and false ! Yes, false ! Even I, a girl deficient in a man's sense of honour, know him to be false, when I see him thrilling under Claire's glances, and remember that Theo is lying, ill and in unconsciousness of all this, at the Swiss cottage.

But through it all I can't get up a feeling of anger against Claire, the beautiful

temptress, my own darling sister. " 'Tis want of thought, not want of heart," I tell myself at one time; and, again, at another I apologize for her to myself, by declaring that her love for Theo, and Theo's love for her, places her on so high a pedestal that she does not see the devotees who are worshipping at the base of it. Even as I think this I tell myself that it is a pretty theory, but that the practice is very imperfectly carried out.

So we go on, through the blistering suns and cutting winds of March, until April comes upon us warmly and weepingly (after the manner of weak woman); and still Theo Bligh lingers on, an invalid at the Swiss cottage, and still Aunt Helen is "too ill" to displace Lady Torrens from that situation to which social duty and humanity have alike called her.

Where am I when I hear it? Gathering snowdrops at the foot of the big weeping elm-tree on the lawn. Some one comes out to me and says—

“ Oh, miss, Sir Harold Torrens is dead, and my lady has sent for you and—— ”

I hear no more. My gathered snowdrops I send flying to the uttermost ends of the lawn, and I go fleetly into the house, where I meet white-faced Claire.

In my excitement I hurl myself at her, catch her hands and say—

“ Come with me, darling. Lady Torrens has sent for me ; her husband is dead : she is in trouble.”

“ In trouble ! ” Claire repeats contemptuously. “ Her trouble is over, Tim ; mine is beginning : will you desert me for her ? ”

“ Desert you ? ” I echo.

“ Yes, desert me ; it has come to this. ‘ Who is on my side—who ? ’ Go to Lady Torrens, if you like ; but, if you do it, never come back to me.”

She is in earnest ; she is *really* ungenerous for the first time in her life.

From the very bottom of my heart well out the words, “ Poor Lady Torrens ! ”

“ Spare me that, at least,” Claire cries

out. "Don't pity her for her release from slavery—for her newly acquired power of going into new bondage honourably. Oh, Tim, spare me this! Don't pretend to pity her."

Claire is transfigured for an instant. All the gentleness vanishes from her beauty; all the possible cruelty that has been dormant all her life comes out. My sister looks like a lovely vengeance, as she rears her slight frame up before me, and commands me not to feel or express any pity for Lady Torrens' bereft condition.

In default of anything original I fall back upon a platitude, and say—

"We ought to go to her, Claire. Just think how unpleasant it will be for her to be left alone at the Swiss cottage now."

Claire almost writhes.

"Don't talk to me about it, Tim," she cries. "She has right, reason, conventionality, hospitality, charity, everything that's good, ranged on her side in justification of *her* course; she is Lady Torrens;

she is a married woman ; she is his dead friend's wife ; she is above suspicion. I know all this, but I hate her the more for holding these winning cards ; for she is a rich *free* woman now, and Theo wants money."

She droops and almost falls as she says it—she, the pet of our county side, the girl on whom so much love has been lavished all her life that she has come to regard it merely as a dutiful daily offering.

I am so afraid myself of what he may be tempted to do that I at once deprecate her fear of him.

"Oh, Claire," I say, "Theo is a gentleman." Then I essay a feeble witticism, and add, "Like the sons of Erin—

'Though he loves women and gold astore,
Sir knight he loves honour and virtue more.'

"I wish you wouldn't follow in his track, and quote appropriate lines," Claire grumbles. "I hate the habit of bringing poetry to bear upon every bit of practice in real life. It may be pretty and soothing

at the time, but if the rhythm is good it haunts one, and helps one to idealize all the misery and cruelty, and falsity and baseness——”

“ Claire ! ” I interrupt.

“ Yes ! I know him as he is, and would marry him to-morrow and go into abject slavery to him,” she cries recklessly. “ *You’re* clever and bright and sweet, Tim, and your own nature is a grand crucial test by which to try that of other mortals, but you have not taken his measure more accurately than I have. I know him in every phase—his perfidy, his mean ambition, his selfishness, and, above all, his deadly art of charming ! Don’t I know him well, Tim ? Even you can’t know him or love him better than I do ? ”

“ I am loving him for your sake ; I’m trying to know him through you,” I protest. And I do mean what I say, for I would not hold out one velvet paw to my sister, while I scratched her with the other, to save my life.

"Ah, you poor child!" she says contemptuously; "you're a better girl than I am, I suppose; at any rate you're more easily hoodwinked."

I can't tell how it is that the matter is settled, but it does arrange itself in some way or other. Papa takes me over to the Swiss cottage, and I find myself with Lady Torrens, but before I meet her I see Sydney Dale, who has a few words with me.

"Claire ought to be here with you, Tim. Why hasn't she come?" he asks.

"Claire is unsettled," I reply, "and you have helped to unsettle her, Syd."

He looks so guilty, so sorrow-stricken at my accusation, that I repent me on the spot of having made it.

"Claire is as sacred to me as if she were Theo Bligh's wife," he answers; "but you won't blame me by-and-by, Tim, if he breaks his trust and I tax her faith again, will you?"

He asks me to sanction his love for my sister as eagerly as if he had never proffered

it to me! What can I do? My fealty to Theo forbids me to wish Sydney God-speed in his wooing of Claire; nevertheless I can't help feeling how secure and well cared for Claire would be, if she could only forget Theo and take Syd contentedly for better and worse. I trust to intention, and let the words that rise to my lips speak themselves aloud.

"I'll never blame you for anything you do, Syd, for you'll never do anything that a man should be ashamed of doing," I say quietly; and I am rather startled when Syd comes and takes me in his arms, and kisses my forehead, and says—

"You darling Tim! I will try my hardest to retain that good opinion of yours, and to do so I must put myself out of the reach of temptation. I'll not see Claire again until I know what line Theo Bligh will take now."

"Do you think—no, you don't think——" I begin; and he puts in—

"I think it will depend entirely upon Lady Torrens whether Theo turns traitor

to Claire or not. If she's as straight as I think her, she'll have nothing to say to him, but you never know what a woman is till she's tried."

It is true: you never do "know what a woman is till she's tried." I go into Lady Torrens' room, expecting to find her rather sad—death can't touch even an enemy without saddening one—but certainly not expecting to find her as sorry as she is. Her eyes are swollen, her face is white; she is nervously agitated, and seems to pine for kindness and sympathy. Is it possible that she can really have cared for old, uninteresting, horsy, dissolute Sir Harold?

"You're a good child to have come to me in my grief," she says, kissing me. "I am very much alone in the world now he is gone. You don't know—no one knows—how good he has been to me, and what care he has taken of me. I can never show him any more that I am grateful—that's what hurts me."

"I didn't know you cared anything at all

about him," I say brusquely, for an impression begins to pervade my impressionable mind that there may be some truth in what Claire has said, namely, that Lady Torrens may be capable of acting a part for the sake of blinding me.

"I didn't care anything about him in the way you mean, my child," she says quietly; "but"—the tears well up into her eyes again as she says this—"I knew that, however far astray my thoughtless nature led me, I had a sure refuge at any moment in him. He was generous, lavishly generous to me, and I should be a worse woman than I am if I didn't feel heavy-hearted to-day at the thought of his being gone from me for ever."

We sit in silence for some few moments after this, for Sir Harold has never been lavishly generous to me, and I can't get up the faintest feeling of gratitude or regret concerning him. Moreover, I feel sure that she is just the kind of woman to have any number of friends at her own sweet will, and so her allusion to her forlorn condition

has failed to touch me. Lastly, I remember that Theo Bligh has been tended by her assiduously for the last few weeks, and this remembrance is the parent of a thousand doubts and fears. These are not dispersed when she says, suddenly—

“You have not asked for Mr. Bligh. How strangely your sister is treating him!”

“In what way?” I stammer.

“In not coming to see him; in avoiding my house as if a pestilence prevailed, while her lover is lying here in suffering and danger. Do you think he is obtuse or callous? Do you think I am blind? Your sister is behaving bitterly to him and to herself, and she does it because she hates me.”

She looks me full in the face as she makes her assertion, and I can't deny it.

CHAPTER XI.

" 'TIS AN OLD TALE."

SHE makes a band of her handkerchief, covers her eyes with it, and leans back in her chair as she says this, and presently she goes on.

"Tim, I'll be very candid with you up to a certain point; beyond that you must not press me. When I knew you first, Theo Bligh was an acquaintance of mine of a month's standing only; but circumstances had thrown us very much together, and he is not the man to abstain from seeking to make a woman he admires admire him in return. He had succeeded so well with me that, if I had not heard from you that he was engaged, I should have arranged it so

that he should have left my house and not crossed my path again. But your news was a tower of strength to me : I dared to trust myself with another woman’s lover. I knew that it wasn’t in me to tempt a man whose heart and honour were pledged, by the show of any sign of interest in him. I will only tell you that though all these long weeks I’ve nursed him as if I had been his sister, that I can look your sister fairly in the face, for I did not overrate my power over myself.”

She pauses, and with delight I acknowledge to myself that I am compelled to believe her.

“ Claire isn’t often unjust,” I say extenuatingly, “ but she has been unhappy and unsettled, and she has fancied things, I suppose.”

“ She has had no right, no cause, no foundation whatever for her idle fancies,” Lady Torrens answers calmly. “ I’m not going to affect to be indignant at her having thought me, a married woman, capable of

carrying on a flirtation ; I've done it a dozen times very successfully and pleasantly since I've been married, but never with an engaged man. It was not my own bonds, but his, which restrained me. I should like your sister to understand that, or she will be more suspicious of me than ever now that I am free."

"Theo is a trying man to be engaged to, you know," I plead.

"Trying ! He's torturing," she says. "Your sister's will not be a happy lot as his wife—though I'll frankly confess that I would marry him myself if he were free. As it is, I'll spare him the temptation my presence would be to him. If he perjures himself, it shall be through no fault of mine. When you leave this house to-day I shall leave it too : the Hall is the proper place for me now, until the new baronet comes to take possession ; and the nurse is quite competent to take care of Mr. Bligh."

"Is he quite out of danger ?" I ask tremulously.

“ Quite, ”she says decidedly. “ He will recover rapidly now, for the nurse has a hoarse voice and is very ugly, and Mr. Bligh would rather exert himself and give himself a little pain than listen to hoarse voices, or look at ugly women. You will probably have him at Ravensbourne in a few days. Wouldn’t you like to see him ? ” she asks suddenly. “ You ought to take back a first-hand account of him to your sister.”

I feel that I grow guiltily glad at the thought of seeing him again. I try to say nay to her proposition, but “ he is going to be my brother,” I remind myself, and so I say—

“ Yes; he may have a message for Claire.”

She rings for the nurse, and that authority gives me leave to see her patient, on condition that I don’t stay too long, that I don’t let him talk too much, and that, in fact, I put myself entirely under her supervision. I give the requisite promises, and follow her into a little morning-room on the ground floor, which opens into the

verandah. The day is mild, the window is open, and the scent of violets is wafted in on the light breeze that just lifts the rings of hair that are lying loosely on Theo's brow.

He is stretched out on a sofa, looking, in spite of his pallor, as gay and bright and handsome as it is his normal condition to look; but his bandaged arm, and a cut which extends from his left eyebrow up to the rings of curls, where it loses itself, reminds me that he has gone through a great deal of suffering since last we met.

He sends the book he is reading skimming across the room as he catches sight of me, and holds his hand out to me warmly, and greets me with vivacious words and smiles.

"Dear little Tim, I'm glad to see you again before the ring is on your hand, and the veil is on your brow. I say, old Murray seems to be taking it very easy, doesn't he? Just shove this pillow straight for me, and sit down."

I straighten his pillow with hands that tremble, and he watches the trembling with laughing eyes. Neither his accident, his estrangement from Claire, nor Sir Harold's death have depressed him in the least. He is exactly the same brilliant, careless boy who chased me from the dining-room window to the side entrance on that summer morning when I saw him first.

“I came over to see poor Lady Torrens, and she asked me if I would like to see you. I don't disturb you, do I, Theo?” I ask timidly, for somehow or other we don't seem to be on the same terms of easy intimacy that we were on before he rode Grey Dolphin to his downfall.

“Disturb me! Not a bit of it. I have seen nothing but that hideous old devil's face for the last three days. I thought when there was nothing more to be done for her departed lord, that Lady Torrens would have remembered that a wounded knight was boring himself to death under her hospitable roof, but she hasn't been near me

yet, and I'm awfully glad to be disturbed by you."

It is not the most complimentary way in the world of greeting me, but it has never been Theo's wont to waste many compliments on me, unless he wants some substantial and immediate return for them. But I am in such abject bondage to my desperate regard for him, that I gladly gather up the smallest crumbs of civility from him, and look upon them as more succulent morsels than can ever fall from another man's lips.

"We have been so anxious and wretched about you all this time, Theo," I say, seating myself on the chair by his pillow.

"Of course you have," he responds; "I've been anxious and wretched about myself too, I can tell you. It's no joke for a fellow to smash his bridle hand and arm as I did; besides, as I have been lying here, I've had time to think what an awful fool I've been in the course of my life——"

"And to make up your mind never to be one again," I suggest.

"Good resolutions are not much in my way, but I have made one or two lately, Tim. One is about Claire. Wouldn't you like to hear it?"

"Yes," I reply, but I wince with the pain of the dread I have that I am destined to carry home evil tidings to Claire.

"It's this, Tim. I'm as idle a dog as ever lived—I know that—and the habit of indulging myself in doing nothing good is growing upon me. I've made up my mind to give Claire up, and leave her free to make a better match with a better man. I'm not going to be selfish about her, at least, any longer."

"Give her up?" I stammer.

"Yes. Just put your chair where I can see you without twisting my neck to look at you. It will be an awful wrench for me, I can tell you; but I can't flatter myself that Claire will care very much about it. Judging from the perfect indifference she

has shown for me lately, and from the preference she's exhibiting for Mr. Sydney Dale, I should say she will receive her order of release with a good deal of satisfaction."

He gives out his heartless decree with so much easy grace, he looks so superbly handsome lounging there, with his head resting on his sound arm, that I realize with all the greater intensity that it will be to rob Claire's life of all its brightness if he does carry out this resolution of his, which he has the heartlessness and audacity to speak of as a good one.

"Well, what do you say, Tim?" he asks impatiently. "Are you dumb? Of all things, I object to my remarks being received with a stony stare and stolid silence. What are you going to say?"

"Claire loves you, Theo," I say, with a sob; "I think it would kill her if you do as you say you will."

"Nonsense! that kind of business isn't done by girls of this generation," he says,

with his gay smile. “ Mine is by far the most unpleasant part of the affair, as you’ll perceive if you only think about it for a moment. I shall have to go to your father with a confession of my utter incapability of making an income sufficient to support a wife upon ; and I know your father well enough to feel pretty sure that he will say something neat and incisive by way of reply, which will rankle in my mind for some little time.”

“ And that will be your sole suffering, your only punishment ! ” I cry angrily. “ Oh, Theo, you can’t mean to be so cruel ? It’s surely not in the heart of a man who *looks* as you do to be so callous, so cold, so horribly cruel to a girl like Claire ? She does love you so ! ”

He moves uneasily, and his eyes refuse to meet mine ; but there is neither hesitation nor embarrassment in the tone in which he says—

“ I tell you I shall act as a man of honour ought to act ”—he speaks as loftily

as if he were determining to do some decent deed—"and Claire will be the first to do justice to my motives and pronounce them right. As for you, Tim"—he puts his hand on my arm, and draws me nearer to him—"I know you better than you do yourself. The flame of *your* wrath against me will soon die out. Why, you couldn't hate me!"

No; he is quite right, I can't hate him, though I know perfectly well that his conduct is hateful and despicable to the last degree. His personal influence is still so strong over me, that I not only can't hate him, but, if it were not for Claire, I would lay my offering of love at his feet, notwithstanding my conviction that he would take it for one hour and spurn it the next. Surely nature must have been in a most vengeful and splenetic mood, when she gave so gracious an exterior to such a graceless heart and mind as his.

"I've thought it better to say this to you, Tim, before I write to Claire. You can put

my real motives before her better than I can word them in a letter; you can make her understand that it's a question of honour with me, and that I do it entirely for her sake.”

The lies rise so readily to his lips that, for a moment, I delude myself into the belief that he must believe them himself. The next instant I recover my reason, and answer—

“ If I tell her your real motives, I shall have to say harder things of you than will be pleasant for me to speak, or for her to hear. Are you deceiving yourself, Theo, or are you only trying to deceive me, when you speak of your selfish, mercenary cruelty as a point of honour? ”

“ Mercenary! A new feature in the case,” he laughs. “ The name of my faults is legion, I admit, but if you'll kindly tell me on what occasions I have developed the miser's spirit, I shall be extremely obliged to you. Good heavens! why, I've never even entered myself for the race for wealth;

on the contrary, I've conducted myself uncommonly like a lily of the field, and been reviled for it. I can neither toil nor spin, but if you will be good enough to propose any scheme to me by which Claire and I can live in comfort and respectability on nothing a year, I shall be your debtor for ever."

"You were in just the same position, you knew all this, when you engaged yourself to Claire," I say.

Then I check myself. It is not meet that I should plead to any man to keep faith with Claire. My sister's dignity, my family pride, my womanly delicacy, all alike protest against my taking such a course. On the other hand, if, for want of a saving word from me, this fickle, unstable nature does veer away altogether, and Claire regrets it lastingly, remorse and self-reproach will claim me for their own through all the days of my life.

He rouses himself from his lounging, easy attitude at last to answer my last rebuking

reminder, and I see, with warm pity that is indeed near akin to burning love, that the splendid stalwart form has become worn and wasted. He catches the change of expression in my face at once, and plays upon the feeling that produces it instantly.

“ You see now how seedy I am, don’t you, Tim dear? I haven’t made much of a howl about it, but it’s been touch and go with me, I can tell you. You ought not to be hard upon a fellow in my state, when he’s struggling to do what is right and honourable at the cost of a good deal of pain to himself.”

He catches his breath with difficulty, apparently, as he says the last words, and with a sound that is half laugh, half sob, throws himself back upon the couch ; while I, fairly melted now, kneel down quiveringly by his side, and murmur forth entreaties that I may get him something, or call for the nurse, or bathe his forehead, or do something that may relieve this sudden access of pain or weariness.

“It’s no use,” he says languidly. “Get up, there’s a darling. If that old harridan comes in, she’ll blow it all over the house and make mischief out of it. You see it’s true, I’m not good for much.”

All the passionately loved, the well-remembered sweetness and brightness of the smile that has been the sunshine of my life, and that has scorched me so horribly, glorifies his face as he speaks. The look of languor and weariness has fled; as he reclines there, I don’t see that his form is attenuated. Once again he is the brilliant, well-beloved youth of the first happy weeks at Ravensbourne. I shall not be called upon to renounce him to that most hideous of all rivals—Death.

“You’re good for a great deal of health and happiness and prosperity, I’m sure of that, Theo,” I say hopefully; and as I say it the nurse comes in, and I have to leave him, unwillingly enough, with Claire’s fate still in the balance.

Lady Torrens is waiting for me, dressed

and ready to start for the Hall, whither the dead Sir Harold has been already carried, to lie in state for the gratification of the morbid curiosity of his tenants and constituents. She lingers for a moment or two under the verandah, questioning me, before we part, as to what has passed between Theo and myself.

“ Does he know that I am going ? ” she asks ; and I say—

“ I did not tell him so.”

“ That’s just as well ; he will be told after I am gone, and I shall be spared an appealing message from him, which might possibly tempt me to break my resolution, and go in and see him again. Have you a good account of him to render up to your sister, Tim ? ”

I shake my head despondently.

“ What ! has he gone back ? isn’t he so well ? ” with the genuine loving anxiety that can’t be feigned.

“ He’s better in health, he’s as bright as ever in mind, but in his heart he’s changed

to my sister Claire," I say, looking at her steadily.

"Changed! Has he let you see the change?"

"Changed so completely that he talks of breaking off his engagement for the *honourable* reason that he can't maintain a wife on nothing a year, and that he won't either toil or spin to make something."

"What a source of unhappiness he is to every one of us!" she says dejectedly. Then she gives me a rapid kiss, gets into her carriage, and is driven away, leaving me more unhappy, more uncertain, more dubious as to "what is, what is not" than I have ever been before in my life.

I send for my pony-carriage, and while I am waiting for it I stroll towards the open window of the room in which Theo is. He must know my step, for he calls out—

"You *are* coming to me? You're not going away without one good-bye?"

I spring through the open window gladly, in response to the heartfelt tones of the

summons, and his face is covered with a fiery blush, as he stammers out—

“ You, Tim ! I thought I heard you drive off just now ? ”

“ That was Lady Torrens,” I say falteringly; for, alas ! I not only realize that the heartfelt tones were not meant for me, but I also understand thoroughly for whom they were meant.

Claire meets me at the lodge gates as I go home, and gets into the carriage with me.

“ I don’t want to hear anything about the widow’s tears and woe,” she begins; “ I don’t believe in either. Papa was saying just now that if she’s left as every one expects she is, she’ll be the richest woman in the county. Don’t pretend to believe that she’s sorry to be left free to enjoy her wealth, and with wealth to enjoy her freedom.”

“ For all her wealth and freedom, she went off to the Hall with a very heavy heart,” I say.

“ Oh, is she gone—coy, careful Lady

Torrens? Now, why should she pretend to think it necessary to leave the Swiss cottage simply because Theo Bligh is there? There's something underhand going on, I always find, when people go out of their way to be so conspicuously proper. She wants to let the whole world see how soon Theo Bligh will run after her."

"There would be something conspicuously improper in that," I remark.

"There would be, there will be; but the impropriety will be on Theo's side, not on hers: she's evidently determined to be without reproach. Did you hear of Theo?"

"I saw him," I say, with a cold shudder, for I dread being cross-examined.

"Did you?"

Glancing askance at her, I see that her eyes dilate and her face blanches, but she is evidently not going to question me. Growing bolder under this conviction, I say—

"Theo thinks you have shown indifference to him, and he has heard of the changed tone that has come over your

intercourse with Syd. I think Theo is hurt, Claire.”

“And what do you think I am?” she asks, with almost fierce energy. “I am hurt so that a look or word from any one now makes me smart all over; I’ve bent so low under the influence of my love for Theo that I feel in the dust, and he won’t hold out a finger to lift me up. His cruel, capricious fancy has changed to me; but, though I feel sure of this, I can’t——”

She pauses, and I whisper—

“What, dear?”

“Do what I feel I ought to do—give him up. Tim, he won’t be able to help loving me when he sees me again, will he?”

Her lovely face turns itself eagerly towards me, and looking at it I can but endorse her belief in the efficacy of its charm. But Theo’s selfishness is as potent as her loveliness, and—Claire has no money!

CHAPTER XII.

"CLAIRE FIRST!"

WE live in a state of direful uncertainty for some little time after this. The worst of it is, that it is uncertainty that we dare not discuss and speculate about among ourselves; for, disguise the truth from ourselves as we may, there is a great deal of humiliation in it. Sir Harold Torrens has been laid in the tomb of his fathers, and a clergyman cousin has come into the title and entailed property, which latter is utterly insufficient to support the title. Accordingly the Hall is let to the widow, and Lady Torrens still reigns over our part of the county by right of her beauty, grace, and wealth.

There has been a brief correspondence between Claire and Theo, but what the whole purport of it may be no one can tell. She merely tells us that Theo will come to Ravensbourne as soon as his health is sufficiently re-established for him to bear the excitement of meeting us all. Meantime, he is going to leave the Swiss cottage and stay with a friend.

“ You’re satisfied about him ? ” papa asks her, when she gives out this information. “ You’re sure you wouldn’t like me to go and see him, and find out exactly how he’s progressing, and if he is doing well ? ”

Papa asks this significantly, and Claire’s answer is significant too.

“ Perfectly satisfied, papa ; perfectly convinced that Theo had much better be left to himself for a time.”

She so evidently means what she says ; she is, I see, so perfectly sure that good will come from the course which she desires may be pursued, that I can’t help feeling convinced that Theo must have written some

very clever and reassuring lie to her. But I dare not investigate. Whatever he has said has made her comparatively happy for the time, and I am getting very much afraid of looking ahead.

My own position is, to speak plainly, an ignominious one. The *trousseau* has in some marvellous manner been got together, thanks to Claire's taste and ingenuity; even the wedding-cake—an awful mass of indigestion that gives me the preliminary shivering fit of bilious fever as I look at and smell it—has come. The twins, and Claire, and a nice-looking, unimportant, young girl friend of ours, have arranged to dress in a pair of pink and a pair of blue costumes respectively; in short, “bride and bridesmaids wait the groom,” and the latter is not forthcoming. The position is an ignominious one, but what joy there is to me in the ignominy of it!

Mr. Murray continues to write me long letters, and they still continue to be of the order which may be read aloud and com-

mented upon in family conclave. But they weekly more and more resemble the letters a clever man would write to a clever boy, whose tastes and sympathies were in unison with those of the man, and who was bent upon chalking out a career similar to that which the man had achieved, than they do those an ordinary mortal lover would address to the ordinary mortal woman he desires to wed. But then Mr. Murray is not an ordinary mortal lover; and surely I'm not an ordinary mortal woman, or I shouldn't be so perfectly well satisfied with the utter lack there is of anything like lover-like devotion on his part.

During this period of uncertainty the twins come more to the fore, in all household and social arrangements and questions, than they have ever done before. Claire and I seem to slide away into an indistinct background, and this not through any undue pushing on the part of Mabel and Magdalen, but just through sheer inability on the part of Claire and myself to hold our own. We

two seem to have had our day; and, ah me! how much the bitterness exceeds the brilliancy of it. But the twins, in their hazel-coloured freshness, are ready for any number of dawns and settings; and we—Claire and I—watch them, and are compelled to confess that they are not declaring themselves ready without being well prepared.

“Whatever encounter they go into they’ll never come out worsted, Tim; they’re such sensible young women,” Claire says to me one day, as we watch the twins driving off with Aunt Helen to the first archery meeting of the season. “They will love in the right direction, you’ll see, and they will marry well, and people will be justified in comparing their case with yours and mine, to our disadvantage.”

“Our cases are not ended yet,” I say, and I try to say it hopefully.

“Heaven help us both! no, they’re not,” she says piteously. “Mine will drag on longer than yours, and conclude more miser-

ably, Tim; for you began by expecting nothing from your scheme, and I began by expecting the highest earthly happiness from mine: but everything has changed, everything has faded and grown dim, even Sydney Dale's liking for me.”

She turns away into the house, shrugging her shoulders, as she goes, in a giving-up, renunciation-of-all-things-pleasant way that touches me into unwise confidence.

“Syd's liking for you is so strong, Claire, that he dare not see you, for fear of being a traitor to Theo, till he know whether Theo is going to be true to you or not,” I say with injudicious warmth; and Claire checks her dejected progress indoors, and comes back to me.

“How do you know this?” she asks.

“He told me so himself, the day I went to Lady Torrens—the day I saw Theo. Claire, if I could kill the regard I have for Theo, I would advise you to turn to Syd: he's such a good, true fellow; his love will last.”

“His love for you hasn’t lasted, apparently,” she says dryly. “He told me himself that to marry you has been his hope from hobbledehoyhood; and yet, as soon as I began to wheedle and flatter and humbug him because I was piqued with Theo, he relinquishes his hope, and shows himself a Samson shorn of his locks at once.”

“Consider what a Delilah you are,” I urge; “have mercy on him.”

“He has had none on himself,” she says contemptuously. “What a coarse net it was I spread for him! He must have been blind or stupid, indeed, not to have seen that it was woven by jealousy of and rage against Theo; yet he went groping into it, and sat stolidly fettered, pretending to believe that I *meant* the nonsense I spoke and acted; and now that I really should be glad of his company for diversion, he takes a sentimental scruple into his head and keeps out of my way. ‘Afraid of proving a traitor to Theo,’ indeed! I detest the idea of a man

being cautious for me in that way; it's a direct implication that I can't take care of myself.”

“He only wants to take care of himself, and to save himself from being hurt further,” I say humbly; and Claire changes her mood in a moment.

“Darling Tim,” she says, “if he had gone from me to you, as he has from you to me, I shouldn't have had a generous thought, much less a generous word, for him.”

Later on this same day, I go out for a ride on the horse that Sydney has given me in exchange for Kismet, with the dogs for my companions. I ride far away through the little-frequented, grass-grown roads and lanes that I have known from my childhood, and try to believe that the wicked wish that I may not live to see another spring is a natural and good one. I am so full of health and vitality that there is not the faintest probability that the wish will be gratified.

But the idea of my marriage is hourly growing more hateful to me, and life holds nothing pleasant for me.

I ride on for hours, regardless of time and distance, until I find myself in a village I have never seen before. It is a large, well-built, clean, thriving-looking village, surrounded by comfortable, prosperous farmhouses and yards. A river spanned by a substantial bridge runs right through the middle of the street, and I pull up on the top of the bridge to rest my horse, and survey the pretty new scene, and let my weary dogs splash and drink in the water underneath.

I sit there staring at the setting sun so long, that when I turn my head at the sound of a horse's hoofs, I am too dazzled to recognize the face or figure of the horseman, but a voice that I know well shouts out hilariously—

“Halloo, Miss Tim! I thought you had gone to other climes long ago?”

There is something so coolly heartless in

the expression of this supposition that I am goaded into saying—

“You may be quite sure that you’ll hear when I am to start for other climes, Theo. You and I have a little affair to settle before I go, you know.”

“Good heavens! how marriage, or the prospect of marriage even, alters and spoils the nicest girls!” he says, sitting at ease in his saddle and lolling forward on to his horse’s neck. “You were the nicest girl, out and out the nicest girl, I ever knew, when I saw you first, and now you’ve degenerated into a mercenary little woman, full of anxiety as to ways and means.”

“I’ve degenerated since you knew me first, I know that,” I say, “but not into a mercenary little woman, Theo.” (I pine so to set myself straight in his unworthy estimation that I am quite prepared to enter into an abject explanation and defence of my conduct.) “Theo, how could you try to hurt me by pretending to think that I could have married and gone away without your knowledge?”

“How could you be so utterly foolish as to believe for a moment that I meant what I said?” he rejoins laughing. “My dear Tim, Murray’s matter-of-fact and carefully cultivated, pruned, and directed humour is spoiling your intuitive perception of it. I thought that *you* knew perfectly well that *I* knew perfectly well that you would just as soon have gone into the untimely grave at once as have left me without a clue to your whereabouts.”

The whole scene swims before me; I feel that I am gasping for my breath and grabbing at my reins, vaguely, weakly, for a moment. Then I steady myself and recover my reason.

“Claire’s husband will always have a clue to the whereabouts of Claire’s sister. When do you come to us at Ravensbourne? Tell me your plans as we ride home.”

“Let’s whistle up the dogs,” he says cheerfully, taking a little silver call from his pocket and using it effectively; “and when we’ve got them safely, I will tell you what

my prospects and plans are as we ride home together.”

“Where are you staying?” I ask eagerly;
“not with——”

“Not with Lady Torrens; set your sweet, jealous, womanly soul at rest about that; I’m at Dalesmeet with Sydney Dale.”

“Syd’s an angel,” I say.

“Not a bit of it. If he were, he would be an exceedingly unpleasant host; as it is, being mortal and well endowed with what conduces greatly to mortals’ happiness, he’s an exceedingly pleasant host. I’ve been with him ever since I left the Swiss cottage. Didn’t you know it?”

“No. I’ve been wondering where you were, Theo; I’ve been longing to see you,” I reply truthfully.

“Is there a screw loose between Sydney Dale and you?” he asks, disregarding my complimentary remark.

“Indeed, there’s not; Syd and I are incapable of getting wrong with each other for an hour even.”

"What keeps him from Ravensbourne, then?" he asks, suspiciously pulling himself up erect in his saddle. "Tell me, Tim, if he's had no split with you, what keeps him from Ravensbourne?"

I am so proud of Syd's honour and integrity, I am so awkward at anything like concealment, I am so in the habit of telling Theo exactly what he wants to know, that I blurt out the truth regardless of consequences.

"He won't come because he likes Claire, and Claire's engaged."

"Poaching on my preserves in his heavy fancy, is he?" Theo says savagely. "Look here, Tim; I'm not jealous, I wouldn't do myself the injustice of being jealous of a fellow like Dale, but Claire must have been awfully careless of her own dignity, as well as of mine, for an oaf like your friend to have forgotten himself so far. It seems to me that, whatever I do after hearing this, Claire will have no cause of complaint."

I have shown him the weakest part of the fortress! I have shown him where to put in the thin edge of the wedge! I have injured the cause I would die to serve—the cause of Claire!

"You've no reason and no right to be angry with him, or annoyed with Claire," I begin protesting eagerly. "She can't help being herself—charming! And he's only a man—how can he help being charmed? You wouldn't behave as he does under the circumstances."

"You're right there," Theo says loftily; "I couldn't behave as he does, Tim. I wouldn't hold out my hand in affected friendship, and open my doors with simulated hospitality, to a man I was attempting to rival. Well, I should pity her taste if she could think of him after me."

"And I should pity your taste if you could think of any one after her," I say, as cheerfully and good-temperedly as I can. "Of course you're neither of you going to flutter any more. I must ride

on now. When will you come to Ravensbourne?"

His brow clears gradually as I speak, but there is a little temper audible in the tone in which he answers.

"I haven't called anywhere since my accident, and I think it's due to the woman who nursed me like a sister that I pay my first devoirs to her."

I picture to myself that agony of jealousy and doubt through which Claire will have to pass when she hears of his paying this open mark of preference to another woman. There will be no comfort to Claire in my knowledge of the very scant encouragement to be false which he will receive from Lady Torrens. It will be Theo's will and wishes on the subject which will contain the sting for Claire. Lady Torrens' disregard of them will be like oil on the flames of Claire's wrath. That her lover should love another in vain is the refinement of torture to the majority of women. Remembering this, I say—

“No, no, Claire first, Theo! You owe it to yourself to pay this girl, who is going to be your wife, the greatest honour—don’t you?”

“By Jove! little Tim, your devotion to Claire makes you worldly-wise and eloquent too,” he says, thawing in his old sudden manner. “I do owe it to Claire. I owe a good deal more to Claire, and to you too, than I shall ever pay; but I promise you, Tim, that I *will* pay that first instalment of my debt to her. If it’s any pleasure to her to see me before I have offered my thanks to Lady Torrens, Claire shall have the pleasure.”

I wisely suffer myself to be satisfied with this. I know Theo so well that I turn away from the subject at once before it becomes tiresome, and the remainder of our ride homewards is all peace and pleasantness. It is twilight when we reach our lodge gates, and I give him a quiet invitation to “come in and see us all” in a simple kind of way that is expressly designed not to startle him.

But he seems afraid of facing the family just yet, for he mutters something about "Dale's waiting dinner" for him, and, with a wave of his hat, he gallops off into the fast growing darkness.

I try to catch Claire as I go into the house, but I fail; they are just filing into the drawing-room, and Claire has only time to smile at me and say, "Late again, Tim." When I come down I find that I can't introduce the subject of Theo without a good deal of awkwardness, for papa knows nothing of his being in the neighbourhood, and so when I am questioned about my ride, I recount it fully, with the exception of mentioning the companion of the latter half of it. Once or twice I try to break the embarrassing bonds of concealment, but they wind themselves about me more and more tightly with every sentence, and when we go into the drawing-room, I feel my face grow hot and red with the difficulty I experience in telling Claire.

"I've seen Theo," I manage to mutter

at last, “and he rode home with me. He’s coming to see you as——”

“Why have you made a mystery of it?”
Claire interrupts. “Tim, you aid Theo in these fatal complications.”

CHAPTER XIII.

“IT IS KISMET !”

THE little unfavourable breeze has exhausted itself. Claire has listened to my honourable reasons for not proclaiming before papa that I had met Theo, and discovered that he was domiciled with Sydney Dale. Theo has been to Ravensbourne, and in his own essentially airy and graceful way has got over everybody, and persuaded Claire that he owes a deep debt to Lady Torrens, and that it is his bounden duty to seek that lady at the earliest opportunity ; and, additionally, he has actually seriously discussed with papa a scheme for maintaining himself and his future wife (as he calls Claire to her parent) comfortably and

honourably. He astounds us all by suddenly avowing that he knows a good deal about farming; that he has studied both cattle and crops practically; and that he means to go in for the post of steward or farming agent on the estate of the new baronet, Sir Ralph Torrens.

"Not know anything about it?" he says gaily, when papa questions his ability for the post. "Just ask Aunt Helen if I didn't grind away down in Cambridge for two years as farming pupil! It's the only kind of country life I can lead, as I haven't an estate of my own; and I think you'll admit that our finances are scarcely suited to the sort of London life you'd like your daughter to lead. I shall be able to keep a couple of horses, and hunt, if I get it."

"While you are hunting I shall be rather dull up in that house among the hills," Claire protests; and papa adds—

"And while you're hunting your work will slip behind you, and the land will go to destruction. You're not fit for it."

“What am I fit for, then?” Theo asks brightly, with consummate ease and grace.

“Nothing that I know of,” papa answers bluntly; but he smiles as he says it, for he, like the rest of us, is always on Theo’s side in his heart and taste in Theo’s presence.

“My own opinion of myself, endorsed by an indisputable authority,” Theo laughs. “Where is the avenging bull who always tossed the idle naughty boys in the fiction of my childhood. It’s odd that he and I have never met yet.” Then he changes from frivolity to fervour in a moment, and adds, “Your father is right, Claire: I am a ne’er-do-well; think well before you go into double harness with me.”

“No one can say that Theo has not given Claire an opportunity of getting out of an ill-advised engagement most honourably,” Aunt Helen puts in; and at this Claire blushes, papa evidently broils, and Theo scowls and growls out a request to Aunt Helen to be kind enough to leave the management of his own affairs in his own hands;

which request of his, being made in real earnest evidently, and not in jest, restores the peace for a time.

It is soon after this that Mr. Murray writes a cheerful, philosophical, interesting letter to me on the subject of "our future," as he terms it—out of politeness, apparently, for it deals entirely with his own. The Government has not kept its word of promise either to his ear or his heart, he tells me without any circumlocution. "Another, and very far from a better man" has got the consulate which had been nominally given to him, and until something else "turns up," Mr. Murray has clearly no intention of taking the irrevocable step, from the moment of taking which we two ill-matched ones will be yoked together so long as we both do live.

I grasp this information glibly and gladly. There is no mortification or humiliation to me in the fact of having been selected, ordered, and not fetched home yet. I don't want to marry him, and I don't want to be

the nine days' wonder of our little set, by reason of breaking my engagement. I am very well contented to remain on the shelf, a thing set apart for an owner who is in no hurry to claim it.

But the passive satisfaction I derive from the first few paragraphs of his letter are considerably dashed by what follows. He does not want to assume the sole responsibility of my well-being yet, but he does want to exhibit his choice, and seek his friends' suffrages for me.

“My sister Janet—Mrs. Macpherson, the widow of my good friend and kinsman Allan Macpherson—has travelled down from her home in the north to see me before I go abroad, and I should like to show her the lassie who is going with me. I would bring Janet on to Ravensbourne if I could leave town, but though she's as good a creature as ever lived, she is never quite her happiest self in the home of a stranger. A staunch, sensible woman, she carries her own habits with her wherever she goes, and nothing

incidental in the way of other people's customs turns her aside from her path. Besides this drawback to my bringing her to your house, my work chains me to town. But the good and graceful thing for you to do will be to come and stay with my sister (whose invitation I enclose) in her lodgings, on the border of the square where I'm living."

"Thank Heaven he hasn't brought his clan here!" papa remarks, when I make public Mr. Murray's wishes. "A female Murray without the learning, and the culture, and the knowledge of the world possessed by your future lord and master, Tim, would be the destruction of all that's humane in me."

"Surely you won't be reckless enough to go and stay with her; you'll be up the family tree so completely that you'll never get down again. Tim will come back waving the wild claymore, and piping the pibroch, and talking of 'the Macpherson,' and generally conducting herself in a deplorably Gaelic fashion,

if we let her go to the excellent lady who carries her own habits about with her, and disregards other people's customs."

Theo is the speaker. He is back staying with us for a few days, devoting himself to Claire in a more fascinating way than ever, and without a back thought of Lady Torrens in his mind, to all appearances.

"I suppose I ought to go," I say hesitatingly, and I look round at the circle in the vain hope that some one will oppose me, and argue against my sense of right.

"I think, if you wish to please Mr. Murray, you won't neglect an opportunity of making the acquaintance of his sister," Claire says. "She's a widow, and she most likely is well off—a woman ought to be who proclaims that she'll have her own way wherever she goes."

"And as she's 'on his border,' you'd see a good deal of Mr. Murray," Theo puts in. "You've been debarred that pleasure lately."

"Girls always have to go through the

ordeal of visiting their lovers' families—haven't they, Magdalen?" Mabel asks.

Then the twins proceed to quote numberless instances of the torments of confusion which have been the portions of various Lauras and Kates and Fannys with whom they imbibed knowledge in their youth.

"Go!" Theo takes an opportunity of whispering to me; and I, taking it into my head that he wishes me to go because he sees that Claire desires to get rid of me for some reason or other, declare aloud my readiness to go to Mrs. Macpherson, if papa sees fit to send me.

Once more papa uses the phrase that he used in his letter of consent to Mr. Murray—"If there is to be a sacrifice, let everything be done decently and in order." Then he takes me apart, and says to me alone, "She may be more sensible than her brother, Tim; she may save you both from making fools of yourselves."

I write and accept the invitation, which

is for me to start the day after to-morrow, and remain with her a month; and then I ride over to the Hall to say good-bye to Lady Torrens, who has been living in such strict seclusion since her husband's death, that people are beginning to be very bitter about her not having given them anything to cavil at. I find her looking very happy, very pretty, and not at all bored by the dull daily routine of the life she is leading.

"And how are the engaged people?" she asks, without hesitation, as soon as she has welcomed me. "Is it going on well? is your sister satisfied, happy?"

"She's always happy when he is with her. You can't wonder at *that*, can you?" I urge.

"Well, I don't know; I've been very unhappy when he has been with me sometimes. What do you think of his offering himself to Sir Ralph as steward?"

"It's not quite the position he ought to hold. Isn't it dreadful that Fortune deals

so unequally with people? Theo ought to be something grand."

"It's not his fault that he isn't," Lady Torrens says laughing; "he only proposed himself as Sir Ralph's steward, after his proposal to do me the honour of becoming my husband had failed. There is no treachery and no vanity in my telling you this, for *you* will not betray him to Claire, and *I* wish you thoroughly to understand that I quite realize that he only wanted my money."

"You know him well, yet you like him still, don't you?" I ask eagerly.

"I know him well, much better than you do, Tim, yet I wouldn't harm him for the world," she says sadly.

"Harm him! Why I'd die for him," I cry, thrown off my balance of caution in an instant at the mere idea of any human being base enough to contemplate the possibility of injuring him.

"If your life would serve him in the least, I've no doubt he would take it," she says,

recovering her light, gay tone with a little effort. "As it is, cherish the fraternal feeling as much as you like, but cherish your life also; it will certainly be useful to other people, and it may be useful to him too."

I am so grateful to her for letting my idiotic expression of sentiment escape the scathing censure which she, as a woman of the world, must have ready to apply to it, that I pass on hurriedly to another topic, and leave off mopping and mowing over that dear one of Theo, which always tangles me, and keeps me struggling in its meshes, whenever I venture near it.

"I've come to say good-bye to you for a month," I say; "I'm going up to town to stay with a sister of Mr. Murray's."

"Good gracious! why go half-way to meet unpleasantnesses? And the sisters of the men we marry generally are unpleasant."

"He and she wish me to go. I'm ready to go because I think it right, and papa has no objection to my doing it."

"Tell me, what do you know of her?"

“He says she’s a staunch, sensible woman, who never gets on in other people’s houses, because she carries her own habits about with her, and never allows them to be interfered with by other people’s customs.”

“What a darling she must be! what a pleasant woman to stay with! Look here, Tim, I’ll be more considerate for you than you have been for yourself; I’ll go up and stay in Green Street, and when you find a change desirable, you shall come to me. What do you say?”

She exercises such a fascination over me by her pretty grace and her cordial warmth, and by the luxurious refinement which surrounds her like an atmosphere, that her invitation seems to offer me a peep into Paradise. I accept it unconditionally, and we then move a step further, and arrange that I shall go to Mrs. Macpherson for a fortnight only, on the definite understanding that at the end of that fortnight I go on to Lady Torrens’, in Green Street.

“I’ve a nutshell of a house of my own

there," she explains to me when I am leaving—"a little bit of a nest, wherein you can fold your wings and rest in comfort, and—that is all I can promise. I can give you no gaiety, for I can't go into it myself. Do you think you like me well enough to stand solitude with me when the murmur of society will be audible, and you'll feel that being with me debars you from it. Dullness in London is very different to dullness in the country, Tim. Will you risk it?"

"Gladly," I tell her; and then she says—

"I shall only admit one friend to our privacy, Tim. I'll tell you who that is when you come to me."

I am half afraid of her feeling insulted by the question, still I must ask it.

"Not Theo—you don't mean Theo?"

"It is not Theo. I have not the least reason to suppose that he will ever wish to come to my house again; but if he does do so, believe me, it will not be to see me. Tim, there is one pleasure we may indulge

in while we're up. I'll take up Wildfire, and get a nice mount for you, and we'll ride. That we can do, even while you're staying with Mrs. Macpherson."

There is a certain jubilant air about all things, I fancy, as I ride home. This project of Lady Torrens' to have me as her guest in town has thrown a halo about my visit to London. In imagination I select the prettiest dresses which have been prepared for my *trousseau*, and resolve to wear them ; for my marriage is an uncertain evil which may never come upon me, and staying with Lady Torrens is a certain joy which is to be shortly realized. All my youth comes back with a rush, as I turn out of the Hall grounds at a slinging trot, and then, coming down to my saddle, send my horse along the grass-grown road at a stretching gallop that cuts the air and makes it whistle in my ears. At any rate, on horseback I shall supplement Lady Torrens fairly. I have not her beauty, and out of the saddle I have not her stately

grace. But in it!—well, I can hold my own against any woman, I feel triumphantly, as my horse swerves suddenly right across the road, and then bounds and rears with terror in a manner that obliges me to crouch down to his glossy mane, in order to retain my balance.

It is nothing very alarming or unusual, after all, which has demoralized my nervous horse—only the flicker of a gipsy-camp fire that is blazing away a few yards up a by-lane we are passing at the moment. As I restore my horse's confidence, and put him across the road again, two or three tall, picturesque forms come over to me, and falter forth their low-toned, courteous apologies for having frightened me. Then they tell me that a woman of their tribe is lying there, in one of the tents, ill to death nearly; and in an impulse of sympathy with suffering, I jump down from the saddle, and follow the husband of the woman to a spot where, stretched out on a few wretched shawls and rugs, and insufficiently covered

by a meagre piece of canvas propped up upon a few low sticks, the dying gipsy lies.

"Our camp took fire the night before last," the man tells me, as he rises up from bending over the suffering woman, whose appearance knocks all my preconceived notions of Romany women and "gay gitanas" on the head. There is no sweet romance about either her or her surroundings. But there are such sorrowful realities about us that my heart aches at my inability to help them.

Evidences of the truth of his statement as to the fire are painfully abundant. Blackened canvas flutters in the breeze; charred children, half clad and wholly miserable, stand and lie about on every side. The sick woman, through the exertions of the whole of the tribe, has been saved from the scorching flames; but the shock has been too much for her weakened, fevered mind, and she lies here now unconscious of all the misery and woe which brings the tears into my eyes as I look upon it. I have very little money

with me, and that I give gladly, together with a promise of food and wine, and linen and ointments, as soon as I can get home to send them. At least, too, I can send clothes to cover the shivering baby limbs that protrude themselves upon my observation from every point. And even if papa is a little hard on the faults of their race, and refuses to administer all the relief I think needful for them, I can apply to Sydney Dalè, and get what I like from him.

I receive poetical blessings in abundance as I pass along between the tents back to the spot where my horse is being held by a brace of black-browed, flashing-eyed boys, who cease from grinning and grimacing as I approach, and assume an aspect of fervour and devotion to the well-being of my horse which is, to say the least of it, uncalled for. I steadily ignore the appearance of several steaming flesh-pots which are suspended from sundry tripods. I decline to sniff in the fumes of savoury compounds which are wafted towards me from every side. The

grave, handsome, sad-looking gipsy who has been my guide has declared to me that they are all naked and starving, and my interests are fairly aroused.

Suddenly, when I come within a few yards of my horse, a loud, ringing, familiar neigh falls upon my ears; and, regardless of my guide's hastening on towards my own horse to show me the way in the gathering gloom, I turn aside, and go in the direction whence that neigh proceeds. A group of gipsy men are standing about a tent that is stretched out upon higher sticks than any of the others. For a moment they close in, but I am as fearless before these men, who, being *true bred*, are sure to respect a woman, as I am in the hunting field. I just pass through their ranks, and they all move aside at once, careful even that not so much as a rag of their fluttering garments shall touch me. I stoop my head at the entrance of the tent, and a velvety nose nearly knocks my hat off; and a sprightly stamp, expressive of pleasure at seeing me, and inability to get out, tells me I was right. *It is Kismet !*

CHAPTER XIV.

"LOVE IS A DEVIL, TIM."

My old favourite, the wicked little mare, shines like a star in the midst of her gloomy surroundings. They are treating her to their best. A bucket full of oats is by her side, a bundle of sweet hay protrudes from an impromptu rope rick, and a beautiful brown berry of a boy stands at her head with a fine white loaf in his hand, from which he feeds her with dainty pieces.

I look round at my guide, the husband of the dying woman for whom all my tenderest sympathies have been evoked, and I am delighted to see that he doesn't look the least ashamed of himself. It makes my task so much the easier. Em-

barrassment on his part would have embarrassed me, but his well-bred indifference to the fact of being “ found out ” reassures me.

“ You must lead this horse home at once,” I say politely; “ the gentleman she belongs to is very fond of her, and he won’t like her staying with you any longer.”

“ She has only been—staying with us since last night,” the man answers ; and no one interferes with me as I proceed to unbuckle the rein of her head-stall from the iron ring to which it is fastened.

“ You must lead her back to her stable, please,” I say a little tremulously, for the other gipsies are beginning to look darkly at me, and my faith in their chivalry receives a trifling shock.

“ We led her away from a stall in the stable of the Golden Lion at Halsford,” my friend tells me ; “ it’s too far for me to take her back there to-night.”

I have got Kismet out of the tent by this time, and her skittishness quickly clears a space for me. As, in her liveliness, she

prances round me, letting her heels out with a carelessness and grace that is peculiarly her own, I feel as safe from molestation from any one of that lowering band as if I had a dozen men or a dozen dogs with me. Moreover, the gipsy to whose wife I have shown tenderness, to whose children I have promised clothes, is passively on my side already, I feel, and will be actively so if any of the others interfere with me, or attempt to thwart me in my endeavour to carry out my views of justice and equity as regards Kismet. Rendered brave by this feeling, I gather up my habit, and walk quickly up to my own horse, Kismet following me like a lamb, and the lounging, soft-footed, stealthy band (who remind me of tigers in repose) coming after Kismet at a safe distance from her heels.

I am terribly frightened now, for I remind myself that Kismet is a valuable horse—that “they shall take who have the power, and they shall keep who can”—that they are many and strong, unscrupulous, and only

acting according to their lights in stealing horses—and that I am a mere girl, and alone. But I won't show the white feather, and so, with a palpitating heart and a steady voice, I say to the gipsy who has been the one to lead me into this difficulty and danger—

"Give me a hand up, please; lift when I say ready; and then send some one who is safe to lead the mare, and I'll show him the way to Dalesmeet, and see her put back into her stable, and your envoy safe off the place unquestioned."

"The mare belongs to a friend of yours, lady?" he asks.

As he speaks he lifts me into my saddle with a subtle, sweeping movement of his hand that no English groom can catch, and as I settle down I bend forward and hold my hand out to him (for he is a gentleman), and say—

"The mare belonged to me; she was *my* pet; and I gave her to Mr. Dale, from whom you've—borrowed her for a few hours. Shall we go now?"

Ay, shall we not with due honour! Every ragged bit of headgear that adorns every picturesquely ragged head in the camp is doffed to me, as I ride through it with a gipsy lad running in step with Kismet by my side. They will not attempt to dispute my possession of the mare that has been a pet of mine, I feel sure, for I have dared to thwart them single-handed in their own stronghold, and at the same time I have treated them like fellow-creatures. For some reason or other I am thoroughly attuned to sympathy with them, and so, as I reach the mouth of the lane, I turn round and wave a parting salutation to the wild troop, who are thrown out in strong relief by the leaping fire-flames, and I feel almost as if I were leaving friends.

We go along the road to Dalesmeet at a sharp pace. I have offered to walk my horse, but the little fleet gipsy boy has declined my offer, and declared in favour of a fast trot. It costs him no effort, evidently, to slip along by Kismet's side; for he talks

glibly enough as he runs, and tells me, among other things, that he is going to marry the daughter of the woman who is sick, in a few weeks, and that he will beat any man who even looks at her or speaks to her after that, until the offender's bones shall be bruised under his accursed flesh. And I preach patience and toleration to him, and feel intensely delighted the whole time with the glimpse he is giving me of the wild, lawless, loving, revengeful nature of his race.

I dismiss him at the door of Dalesmeet House as soon as, by a vigorous ring at the bell, he has summoned a servant to my aid; and then Sydney comes to me and listens to my adventure, and pets and caresses his recovered mare as tenderly as if she were a woman. As he stands with one hand on Kismet's neck, and the other on the off pommel of my saddle, I am struck by the careworn, sad look that seems to have settled upon his face. I bend near to him suddenly, and say—

"Syd, you're ill or unhappy? Which is it? Tell me before I go. I'm going away, the day after to-morrow, for a month."

For answer he says—

"I've kept my promise, you see; I haven't been near her, Tim."

"Is it that? Do you still care for Claire? Oh, Syd! how can you be so weak?"

"Shall I tell you? When you wouldn't have the love I'd cherished for you ever since I was a boy, I felt disappointed and miserable, but not at all bitter. There was no dishonour in my failure; you were just the same as you had been all along; and I could bear the consequences of my mistake, because there had been nothing mean in my making it. I told myself that no other woman should ever win from me what I had given to you, and you had not taken. You were so perfect in my eyes, that I believed it to be an impossibility for any less perfect woman to come between me and my right to think of you still as the one love of my life. And so, when Claire began to lead me on at

first, I was so confident in the strength of my good love for you, that I never even thought I was in danger from her, until she broke down the barriers herself, and maddened me by such a show of preference as I should have been more—or less—than man if I had withstood. She did it to pass away the time till Theo Bligh came back to her, but she has ruined my life; for she's made me lose my self-respect, and destroyed my right to think of you as the girl to whom I had been true all my life. It's her face that's always rising before my eyes now, it's her voice that is always ringing in my ears; and all the time I know that she never thinks of me, and never has thought of me, except as a birch rod to bring Theo Bligh into order.”

“How cross everything is cut in this world!” I say, with a vivid recollection of the various wrong directions in which the tendrils of affection of everybody with whom I am concerned are turning.

“It's our own lookout, in a great measure, that it is so,” Syd says.

"No, no, it isn't," I cry eagerly. "We don't hold the scissors of fate. Do you think, if I had been a free agent, I wouldn't have cut out a different pattern for my own life? Do you think that it's my wish and will to go away from every one I love, to spend the rest of my days in a strange land, among people who'll only think of me as an unpleasant, dissatisfied sort of a woman, who's not fit for the position in which she has been placed. You're luckier than I am, Syd: you have yourself to yourself still."

"And no one need envy me the possession," he sighs out; and though there ought to be something infinitely comical to me in the idea of dear old Sydney sighing under any circumstances, I don't feel inclined to smile at him now. His sorrow and remorse are very genuine things, and I can't help feeling that he is not the one who ought to suffer from these things.

"Look here, little lady," he exclaims, as I sit still gazing at him, and pondering over what he has said and what he has implied;

“you must wait a few minutes while I have my horse saddled ; I shall ride home with you, and, as we go, you must tell me more about this projected trip to town.”

I don't know how it is that, as we ride homewards, we are led on to speak of the many, many times we have traversed these lanes together, or what gloomy forethought it is which leads me to say—

“I shall remember our last ride all the days of my life, Syd.”

“Why speak of it as our ‘last,’ Tim dear?” he says, trying to speak cheerily. “I’ve told you before, mine will always be the bachelor brother’s house to which you and yours will come when you want change of air ; for I’m more than ever fixed in my purpose never to marry now.”

“How wretched that Claire and I should have been the girls to spoil your life!” I say mournfully ; and, little vain as I am, Sydney does not raise my spirits by replying—

“It’s not your fault, dear ; you’ve nothing whatever to do with it now. It stings me as

much as anything else that I can't regret having lost you, who are so much better worth winning, as I do having lost Claire."

"You can't call it having lost Claire," I protest; "she was never yours to lose."

"Never in reality—she only said she was," he says bitterly. "What a black-guard I am to speak about her!" he continues hastily.

"I believe you would die for her," I say, with that unaccountable longing to probe a wound which is common to the majority.

"That's not much for a man to do, to be ready to lay down his life for the woman he loves. I've done more—I've laid down my honour for her; and we're so thoroughly wrong all round, that at the same time I've thought very hardly and badly of Theo Bligh. You're safely home, dear, now. Good-bye."

He holds his hand out, and an instinct of hospitality makes me say—

"Do come in, Syd; it's too sad never to see you here."

"I can't stand the sight of them yet," he says, shaking his head; "by-and-by I shall be less of a fool. Good-bye, my always true little Tim." He leans forward as he speaks, and kisses me; and then, with the words, "My first kiss and my last, Tim," he rides away, and I go in, feeling now that it is too late—that there is a great deal more to love in Sydney Dale than I thought there was in my salad days, when I might have had him.

My family pay me the compliment of being very eager, not to say wildly curious, for information on the subject of the way I have been redeeming the time this afternoon. I see Claire's eyes glitter when I tell them that Lady Torrens is going up to London, and that she has asked me to be her guest; and Theo lifts his head at the sound, and shoots a laughingly interrogatory glance at me. I can't help giving him a resentful glance, and apparently he gathers from it all that he wants to know, for he bobs his head backwards and forwards in a way that signifies "I thought so," and as

soon as he can do so unheard by the others, he says to me—

“Did Lady Torrens do me the honour of making any inquiries about me?”

“She asked me how you and Claire were getting on.”


“And I hope you told her that you considered our case was progressing very favourably?”

“She would hardly have believed me if I had told her so, after her recent experience of you,” I say unwarily.

“She’s been boasting, has she?” he says, and his eyes emit sparks of light. “There’s not one woman in a thousand who understands the point of honour; there’s not one of you that a fellow’s safe with, when once you begin to gabble to one another. You’re all alike under such circumstances; your fancies lead you into making such statements that no fellow is safe.”

He is unmistakably angry, and in his anger he lets himself slip back into uncouth, school-boy rudeness. Nevertheless, though

the rudeness stings me, and though there is nothing so disillusioning, as a rule, to a woman as anything bordering on incivility from a man, however much she may be infatuated with him, I can't even wonder why I like him myself, or look upon it as at all a thing to be marvelled at, that Lady Torrens and Claire should have surrendered their hearts and happiness to him without discretion. His power lies, I am inclined to think now, in his provoking way of concentrating attention on himself, by means of the warm interest he takes in, and the unceasing satisfaction he feels with, himself. Yet that's not it either; for if another man were half as vain, half as egotistical, half as conceitedly at ease with himself, and cheerfully certain that he was gaining universal suffrages, we should all recoil from him as something infinitely little. Up to the present time we none of us have evinced anything like a desire to high-mindedly recoil from Theo. It's no use trying to define what it is. Even as he



scolds me roughly, and brings bitter, boyish, untrue accusations against my sex, I know that I like him better than all the rest of the world. It is a fascination so subtle that I am conscious that, if he tried to give me some curing shock, however shattered I might be by it, all that was left of me would go on loving him to the end. What a fool I am! And yet this very fidelity which makes me such a fool, is the quality that is most highly prized in woman!

"You wouldn't have thought that she was boasting, Theo, if you had heard her. She doesn't even wish me to suppose that you cared for her, or pretended to care for her. I declare, I should have thought better of you if it had been love of her, and not love of money, which had made you false to Claire."

He laughs contemptuously.

"That just shows that you want a little fuller instruction than you've had yet in the art of love," he says. "Why, Claire would never forgive my loving another

woman, and telling her so ; but she would sympathize with my tender passion for filthy lucre. My dear Tim, don't you deceive yourself. I'm no Don Quixote ; I don't go out and fight wind-mills, nor do I elevate the girl of every-day life into a heroine of romance. I know perfectly well that Claire has provided for the worst contingency in my case ; if our engagement comes to smash, she'll settle down very comfortably at Dalesmeet, and Sydney Dale will be a very tractable husband. No one knows better than Claire how to play the game of consequences ; *she* has prepared for the worst, and is ready with a clear statement as to 'why she will marry her own love,' whichever he may be. Why blame me for having tried to be equally provident ? "

I would like to defend Claire from this mean charge of interestedness and low policy which Theo is bringing against her, but the words are ringing in my ears which Sydney Dale used when I told

him that Claire had "never been his to lose"—"Never in reality—she only said she was;" and the sound of them robs the line of defence I would like to adopt of all its powers.

Before I commit myself to the care of my future husband's family, Claire breaks the ice, and speaks of Sydney.

"I'm afraid I went too close to the border with Sydney, Tim," she says, in a tone in which I strive to detect a penitential cadence. "He might be generous enough to forgive me, though, for our old friendship's sake. Can't he understand that it was Lady Torrens' manner about Theo that upset my balance? You like her and trust her, I know; but, really, even you must confess that Theo is one in a thousand to have withstood her lures, or that I am one in a thousand to have chained him!"

I can't even feel annoyed at my sister's vanity; I pity her too sincerely for the delusion under which she labours, for I

know that at any moment, should it suit him to shatter it, that delusion will be shattered ruthlessly by Theo Bligh.

"You should have spared Syd," I say.

"Spared Syd! Nonsense!" Claire says contemptuously. "Do men ever spare us? Tim, it's a horrible thing to say, but all my experience of what is called 'love' goes to prove that it's war to the knife between the sexes. One of the two *must* be hurt in every encounter of the sort—why should it always be the woman? If Kismet had ever thrown you and dragged you in the dust, wouldn't you have taken it out of the next horse you rode?"

"It would have been mere revenge to have done so."

"It would have been—and revenge is sweet to a woman."

"And revenge is ignoble, too. Why should I profess to feel it when I don't?"

Claire bends her face down on my shoulder, and hugs me to her closely.

"I don't know what revenge may be,"

she says, “ but ‘ love ’ is a devil, Tim. It’s making me try to corrupt you. If *you* turned traitor to your true nature, I *should* believe that there was ‘ no light in heaven or earth.’ ”

CHAPTER XV.

AUNT HELEN CAN SUFFER.

It is my last evening at home, and I am wearing away the time as best I can. It flags terribly, in spite of my most earnest endeavours to make it seem the fleeting thing it is. There is a wistful air about papa, whenever he does bestow any attention upon me, which seems to me to bode something evil, or, at least, unpleasant. Aunt Helen is steeped in deeper torpor and lethargy than usual; the twins are preparing to go out and do battle in the most respectable way, at various polo matches, and archery meetings, and race balls; and Claire and Theo don't want me.

Pretty April has given up her place to bright green May, but she (April) comes back to us constantly in floods of tears so soft and clear, that the children of her successor bathe in them gladly, and are beautified by the process. Our wilderness is a paradise of flowers now; and so, remembering that I have heard that a few blooms and green leaves are a boon to those who dwell in dark London squares, and high-housed, shady streets, which seem specially designed to build out the few sunbeams Nature vouchsafes to shoot down upon this "right little, tight little island," I slip out from the house, and run across the lawn, determining to get everything green and bright which that wilderness can yield to me, as an offering to Mrs. Macpherson.

I am in a gluttonous mood this evening, and I gather such a bouquet of the great, pure white, starlike blossoms of the stitchwort, as would fit it to be a suitable offering to a bride. Around this I place a border of the germander speedwell, whose heavenly

blue requires something delicately clear to tone it down. I find what I want directly in the dainty wood-sorrel, with its bright trefoil leaves, and its transparent, white-veined, slightly drooping bells. The genuine shamrock of old Ireland! Surely no penalties are so heavy, no pains so severe, as to make us give up "the wearin'" of such green as this?

I don't "think" these sentiments, as I stand here gathering my flowers "eagerly," but still with such loving care that I don't bruise a single petal or stamen. All my thoughts are concentrated on this one object, namely, that of arranging them to the best of my ability, as a propitiatory offering to Mrs. Macpherson. As I kneel down to tear away a piece of waving, succulent-looking moss from a boulder, every other consideration is knocked out of my head by the sight of Aunt Helen surging round the trunk of a tree to meet me.

I get up and shake the dirt off my hands, and feel that either Aunt Helen or myself

will go out of this wilderness to-night having got "the worst of it."

"Tim," she begins panting, "I have come to say a few words to you that will be very unpleasant for me to speak, but I think it's well you should hear them; for I want your help, and when I've told you something I'm going to tell you, I think you will give it to me gladly."

She pauses, not for want of words evidently, but for want of breath; and I stand quietly and silently before her, arranging and rearranging my bouquet.

"You've never liked me, Tim—I'm well aware of that," she resumes presently, and her big face flushes at some recollection (perhaps it is of that scene in papa's study, which took place when I was a child)—"and I've never liked you; but I'm going to trust you now as I wouldn't trust one of the others, for I know you've a good head, and I think you have a good heart."

I'm not a bit carried by the flattery; it only makes me keenly conscious that Aunt Helen has some great point to gain.

"I know what your feelings are about Theo," she goes on coarsely. "No need to redden about it, child; a girl can no more help falling in love than she can help growing. I saw from the first of his coming here how it was with you, and if I hadn't fancied that you were the one from whom danger was to be apprehended, I should have seen and put a stop to the nonsense with Claire before it came to an engagement."

"It's too late to talk of that now," I say; "it has come to an engagement, and it will come to a marriage, in spite of you."

I delight in defying her, and I am quite justified in doing so, I think, on the good and loyal ground of fidelity to Claire.

It costs her an effort to keep her temper under, I can see; but she achieves the difficult task, and answers me very calmly.

"You are fond of Theo; what will you say when I tell you that if he marries one of your father's daughters, such disgrace


will fall upon him, as he will never be able to throw off—never be able to hold his head up under. Poor boy! poor dear, innocent, unhappy boy!”

She is crying bitterly, and her tears are genuine. I am touched in spite of my aversion to and distrust of her. She is in earnest now. Whatever the feeling may be that actuates her, of this I am sure—it is a real one.

“Why should disgrace fall upon him, if he marries one of us, more than if he marries any one else?” I argue.

“Because I am pledged to reveal a secret about him, which I have kept all the boy’s life, before he becomes your father’s son-in-law; and when he knows it, your father would break it off if they stood at the altar, and Theo would learn the cause, and would be—and feel—dishonoured—and might come to hate me,” she adds, with a shudder of heart-felt pain.

I look into her eyes and strive to read her thoughts, and the secret which concerns



Theo; but she dazzles me with her tears, and bewilders me by shaking her head.

“Why have you come to tell me this?” I ask sulkily.

“Because I know you love Theo well enough to try and serve him,” she answers quickly. “Don’t injure him with Lady Torrens, and don’t thwart me in every attempt I make to break the chain between him and Claire.”

“You’ve always been unjust and unkind to me,” I say; “but you’ve never been absolutely cruel to me till now. How can you ask me to be the one to help you to hurt Claire?”

“What’s Claire to me compared to him?” she cries. “Disgrace will fall upon him, I tell you, if they persist in this engagement. Can you bear that for him? *You*, I thought, at least, loved him unselfishly.”

“So I do,” I say boldly; “that’s the very reason why I don’t want to see him perjure himself to Claire, and go with false vows of love to Lady Torrens, when he only wants

her money. Moreover, Aunt Helen, it's too late ; Lady Torrens has seen through him, and refused him."

"Because of his engagement to Claire. If he went to her free, she would tell another story—she couldn't wring her own heart then by refusing him."

"Why should he marry Lady Torrens more than Claire?" I ask impatiently. "If something disgraceful about him must come out before he marries Claire, it ought to come out before he marries any other lady. No, Aunt Helen, your appeal to me is useless ; I won't be tricked into the certain evil of being false to my sister for the sake of doing a very uncertain good to Theo. Keep your secret from me still ; I won't be your ally."

"Not when I tell you that Theo is illegitimate, and that if this marriage with Claire is persisted in, he must learn that there is a stain on his birth, and the knowledge will crush him?"

She speaks tremulously, excitedly ; but it

is borne in upon me that she speaks truly, and my heart sinks low, and my head whirls, as a vision of the agony and shame that will be Theo's portion, should this bitter secret ever be divulged, flashes itself before me. My father's strongest feeling, next to his love of letters, is his honest pride in the purity of his race. He has no sons to carry on his name; and if his daughters marry men who have no fathers' names to bear, there will indeed be no balm in Gilead for him. I know all this; I realize it with vivid force. At the same time, Theo himself, the first and last god of my imagination, is still enshrined there, untainted by the terrible accident of his birth.

"The sin of his father and the shame of his mother will crush him when he comes to know of it," Aunt Helen goes on in a voice that is very terrible to me in its newly acquired intensity of purpose and feeling. "Won't you help me to spare him the knowledge, Tim? Is your love for him so poor and mean that, because he does not

love you in return, you'll stab him to the heart with such a poisoned blade as this secret of his birth will be when it's flashed before the eyes of the world."

I writhe in my innermost spirit under the influence of her goading words. That I should be suspected even of a desire to humiliate the man I have loved so desperately ever since I have known what love is, is too cruel, too unjust! On the other hand, how can I even consent to remain neutral, while Claire's adversaries are trying to undermine her happiness? I am in a cleft stick; act as I will, I must seem to act badly. I have smarted under the consciousness of being unattractive all my life; but I never before felt hopelessly awkward, as I do now. In this extremity I do what a woman almost invariably does, when her heart and interests are at war with equity and justice, wisdom and discretion—I endeavour to temporize.

"Supposing we let things drift?" I say, suggestively. "Why can't we go on just as

we are now? There is no immediate call made upon you to denounce Theo as something too degraded, through no fault of his own, to papa. Papa may never inquire into his parentage; and even if papa does come to know it, he may say like the man who tells the tale of the painter's shame in the American poem—

‘Not thine,’ I cried, ‘another’s guilt.
I’ll break no hearts for silly pride;
So kiss yon weeper, if thou wilt.’”

“When you indulge in high-flown bursts, and quote poetry, and cease to take a commonplace and sensible view of a commonplace misery, I feel indeed that I have made a mistake in relying upon your aid, Tim,” she says, wagging her large head at me mournfully. “Well, I’ve done my best to spare Theo. If you had joined me in trying to stave off disgrace from him, disgrace *would* have been staved off; as it is—— My poor boy! my poor boy!”

She buries her face in her hands, and

her fat frame is convulsed with sobs. What a twist there must be in my moral vision, that even in this supreme moment of genuine distress, my physical one can't help seeing how bovine she is; and the sight paralyzes all the sympathy I should otherwise feel for her, as a woman who may be compelled to deal a death-blow to one whom she evidently dearly loves. I steel my heart, and ice my accents, and say—

“Aunt Helen, all you have said this evening seems to me so artificial and hysterical that I shouldn't be justified in acting upon it at all, even if I were inclined to do so. As it is, I'm not inclined to do so, and I'm happy to say that I'm going out of the reach of the temptation to be a snake in the grass to Claire, under the guise of being a real friend to Theo.”

She looks at me vaguely and vacantly for a moment or two; then a spasm of pain contracts her usually creaseless face, as she says—

“I try to do what is best for him now,

but consequences are pitiless. My best efforts will do him so little good, poor boy, unless they're assisted by others, who have the power but not the will to serve him. It is only fair to tell you, Tim, that Claire will suffer as much as he will when the climax comes. Does that move you?"

"She'll cling to him more closely when he's in trouble and unmerited disgrace," I say vehemently. "Claire won't love him the less when she hears that he is——"

"A child of shame!" she says sternly. "It's hard for me to say it of him, Tim, but I will say it broadly to you, in the hope that you may be touched to pity for him, that you may be won to help me to try to spare him the hearing of the horrible words. As for Claire clinging to him in his downfall! Ask yourself. Is Claire a girl to bear the sneers of the world? Is Claire a girl to be happy in obscurity with a man who can't even give her a name?"

She asks her questions with scathing force, and I acknowledge that they are

unanswerable. In the bottom of my heart there lurks a doubt of Claire's staunchness under circumstances that are not only adverse, but disgraceful. I should deem myself only too well favoured if I were permitted to have the right, and allowed to exercise it openly, of clinging to Theo in the face of the whole world, however degraded he might be socially. But Claire, from her earliest childhood, has had a habit of looking at things from a society point of view. She has a strongly marked aversion to ignominy, and obscurity, and poverty. Perhaps, when she learns that she will have to taste freely of all these in marrying Theo Bligh, her spirit will faint, and her steps will falter away from him, and of her own accord she will leave him free to choose another wife.

For a moment there is a possibility of happiness to me in this thought; then I remember Mr. Murray, and all the little fetters which are being fastened about my feet; and then I can only see possibilities

of fresh forms of misery in Theo's freedom, and feel prophetically sure that they will shape themselves.

Aunt Helen says no more, but stumps away through the wilderness and across the lawn as quickly as she can; and I saunter moodily behind her, all the vitality and hope of brighter days dawning for us crushed out of me by the knowledge I have of this woeful secret about Theo. Illegitimate! illegitimate! The word has an awful sound to me. It is only associated in my mind with some poor village girl's downfall and disgrace. But Theo's mother *must* have been a lady. He being what he is, his mother must have been a lady as gently born and bred and as beautiful as Claire. "How could a mother do such a son so great an injury?" I ask myself indignantly, forgetting, in my wrathful sorrow, that the evil was wrought before Theo was a grown-up and irresistibly handsome and fascinating man.

I look at him anxiously when I get back

into the drawing-room, and I tell myself that Aunt Helen's disclosure is a mere trap to catch me. He is singing to Claire's accompaniment—singing very badly indeed, as far as science and management of his uncultivated voice goes, but with a degree of fervour and taste that makes me prefer him infinitely to Sims Reeves. The song is not one of the idiotic, ephemeral trifles of the day. They are grand words, full of pride and glory, and they are set in a way that is worthy of them.

“I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more,”

he is bellowing out as I go in, and I ache with pity for him at the thought of the bitter draught of dishonour that is being prepared for him, and envy Claire her right to cling to and comfort him as only the woman he loves can.

He looks gaily, blithely proud and happy, so infinitely superior to the bluest-blooded men I know, that, as I sit looking at him, I doubt Aunt Helen's veracity more

and more. Suddenly my eyes fix themselves on her face, and I doubt her veracity no longer. I never saw such yearning, hopeless, apologetic love expressed in any living face before. Somewhere on canvas I have seen it, and sympathized with it intensely; but this breathing picture of loving remorse stirs some depths in my nature that have not been fathomed yet. Aunt Helen can suffer on account of a fellow-creature! Aunt Helen can suffer for somebody besides herself!

END OF VOL. II.

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